

**WHAT DOES
IT MEAN TO BE
POST-SOVIET?**

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ON DECOLONIALITY A SERIES EDITED BY
WALTER D. MIGNOLO AND CATHERINE E. WALSH

**WHAT DOES
IT MEAN TO BE
POST-SOVIET?**

**DECOLONIAL ART
FROM THE RUINS OF
THE SOVIET EMPIRE**

Madina Tlostanova

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Ultimately, in the war between the refrigerator (rising food prices) and the television set (the war in Ukraine), the refrigerator is likely to win.
 —*The Economist*, December 17, 2014

INTRODUCTION

A Futureless Ontology?

I was writing this introduction at a very complex and rapidly changing global geopolitical moment when the very future existence of Russia as a separate state was becoming problematic. I was writing from the relatively safe position of chaired professor at a Swedish university, but I was and will always remain a product of the Russian and Soviet imperial legacies—a postcolonial other with ancestors originating in the Russian Orient and the Russian South—the two darker colonial spaces that are seldom taken into account in any imperial-colonial discussions. Therefore, I am a person from the darker side of the Russian/Soviet modernity/coloniality. In this book I focus mainly on the experiences, sensibilities and creative work of the postcolonial artists who happen to be at the same time postsoviet. Yet I would like to start with a few preliminary remarks on the evolution of the Russian imperial difference that, in tandem with the failed yet never buried Soviet modernity project, has led to today’s stagnation, anomie, and looming disintegration.

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The Imperial Difference Once Again

In several works coauthored with Walter Mignolo and in my own texts I have touched upon the specific nature of external imperial difference and Russia as a graphic example of such a difference (Tlostanova 2007, 2014, 2015; Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012).¹ To put it simply, starting from about the sixteenth century a global imperial hierarchy appeared in the emerging world system. Within this hierarchy several imperial leagues were formed and transformed in the course of time. In the post-Enlightenment modernity Spain, Italy, and Portugal moved to the position of the South of Europe and hence to the *internal* imperial difference that never collapsed into absolute or insurmountable forms. The Ottoman sultanate and Russia, on the contrary, became the zones of *the external* imperial difference, as they were rooted in different (from the core European norm) religions, languages, economic models, and ethnic-racial classifications. Both internal *and* external imperial others were never allowed to join the first league and become equal to Great Britain, France, or the United States today.

One might think that these markers ceased to be valid anymore. Yet in reality they continue to flourish and affect the global geopolitical relations, classifying people and defining the validity of their lives in line with the original matrix of modernity and its rigid human taxonomies and hierarchies. A terrorist act in Paris is unconditionally regarded, and represented, as a tragedy in both global mass media and social media, whereas the deaths of thousands of civilians daily in the Middle East go practically unnoticed. A quiet decay of Russia as the largest remnant of the Soviet empire would also remain completely uninteresting to the world which is indifferent to the fate of several dozen million people who have all become hostages of the inhumane regime. It is only the looming global nuclear threat and the neo-imperial geopolitical ambitions of the Russian administration, which is trying once again to break into the first league previously irremediably losing in its imperial status, which still keep Russia on the front pages. The pragmatic security discourses then remain the only justification for the rest of the world to continue paying attention to this faraway region pushed more and more out of the world system, and reduced in its rank from the semi-periphery to an ultimately peripheral status.

What is at work here can be called a rule of regressive turning of imperial difference into colonial one, when a second-rate empire, in the imaginaries of the winning rivals, is regarded as a colony, soon starts to realize this

status, and react in aggressive and negativist ways. Thus the failed Soviet	1
modernity shifted into the colonial realm in relation to the winning neo-	2
liberal modernity/coloniality, yet retained some traces of its own, internal	3
imperial-colonial structures and hierarchies, the most obvious of which is	4
the colonizing attitude to the non-Western, postcolonial, post-Soviet others.	5
But the very realization of this difference by the imperial ideologues al-	6
lowed them to use this argument in their favor. And the Russian imperial	7
revivalism acquired an opportunity to take the forms which externally re-	8
sembled anticolonial struggles, at times appropriating the decolonial argu-	9
ments, and trying on the role of the victim in global geopolitics. This is	10
what is now taking place in Russia in its efforts to pretend to be a postco-	11
lonial subaltern and thus justify its revived imperial expansionism. But the	12
wolf's fangs stick out of its sheep's clothing.	13
The Russian imperial difference triggers its specific schizophrenia,	14
which is different from the classical Duboisian double-consciousness (Du	15
Bois 1903) in its clearly negative stance. The imperial double-consciousness	16
in contrast with the colonial one is unable to mutate into anything con-	17
structive; it either has to go or it has to be radically transformed into a dif-	18
ferent model. Russia is choking on its own rejection and fury addressed to	19
both the stronger imperial rivals and the weaker colonial others.	20
Imperial difference in itself is evidence of the agonistic and rigidly hi-	21
erarchical nature of modernity/coloniality. At its core is an implied and	22
delocalized reference point that originally lay in the heart of Europe but	23
has now shifted toward the Anglo-Saxon world, with its heart in the United	24
States. The rest of the people are taxonomized along the human scale of	25
modernity in relation to their proximity to this vantage point. Some are as-	26
signed a status of the forever catching-up agents or even voluntary define	27
it as their goal. Others are placed into the ghetto of absolute otherness	28
and are withdrawn from history and modernity. As for the post-Soviet, and	29
wider post-socialist, condition, in the past twenty-five years it has demon-	30
strated the growing dispersal tendencies which remap the former Socialist	31
subjects and position them along different vectors and within different alli-	32
ances in the new world order where the precarious Socialist semi-periphery	33
is rapidly sliding into a more and more chronic peripheral condition.	34
The post-Soviet trajectory of Russia and a number of its former colo-	35
nies shows that they were first lured by the carrot of the catching-up mod-	36
ernization and even, in the case of the European semiperiphery, by the	37
promise of getting back to the European bosom, but these models were	38

1 grounded in false evolutionism. With different speeds and to different ex-
2 tents of realization of their failure most of these societies grasped that they
3 would never be allowed or able to step from the darker side of modernity
4 to the lighter one, from otherness to sameness. The only move they could
5 count on is comprised of the small steps along the endless ladder of mo-
6 dernity that ultimately led nowhere yet always enchanted with a desired
7 but unattainable horizon. A number of postsocialist communities started
8 cultivating bitter reactions of disappointment in the European, and wider
9 Western, project, and their critiques resembled, and even openly borrowed
10 from, postcolonial arguments (Lazarus 2012; Slapšak 2012).

11 The EastEuropean countries were interpreted within the global neoliber-
12 al modernity/coloniality in a progressivist rather than Orientalist manner:
13 they were considered to be reformable and eventually subject to European
14 assimilation, yet always with an indelible difference. The postsocialist people
15 were offered to accept, without question, the existing global hierarchy in
16 which everyone is assigned a precise, fixed and never questioned place,
17 and is afraid of losing that precarious position by being associated with
18 countries—such as those of the global South—that stand even lower. The
19 postsocialist countries’ almost unanimous refusal to accept refugees, a posi-
20 tion supported by both their governments and their populations and often
21 verbalized in exclusionary, racist forms, should be interpreted not only
22 through a simple economic rationale and the specific mythology of Eastern
23 Europe acting as a sacrifice to inhuman communist regimes, but also, and
24 more importantly, be interpreted as a trace of the modern/colonial rivalry
25 that, in the case of these “new” Europeans, is not alleviated by discourses
26 of welfare, charity, or solidarity.

27 28 **Postcolonial Rhetoric Borrowed by Post-Socialist Countries**

29
30 The appropriation of postcolonial and, at times, decolonial rhetoric in
31 relation to the postsocialist countries in the increasingly unipolar (in de-
32 spite all of the proclamations of multipolarity) world, has gone quite un-
33 evenly. In postsocialist Eastern Europe it was faster, more successful, and
34 less censored because the liberating rhetoric logically shifted from the old
35 dependence on Russia and the USSR to a critique of the new dependence
36 on Western Europe and the United States without touching the interests
37 of the new national elites. The discourse of postcolonialism was not only
38 harmless, therefore; but was even somewhat useful for the newly indepen-

dent states. The postsocialist intellectuals started to write about the subalternization and peripheralization of Eastern Europe and Central Europe and on the sensibility of European poor relatives who were forced from their real socialism into the real neoliberal capitalism, with no hope for success or, sometimes, even for mere survival (Kołodziejczyk and Sandru 2012; Pucherová and Gáfric 2015). Postsocialist artists such as Ciprian Mureșan and Tanja Ostojić have addressed the metaphors and imagery that intersect with postcolonial sensibilities, often through projecting these artistic means onto the contemporary global coloniality.

However, these sentiments did not lead to any wide-scale state Socialist renaissance movements, or even to simple nostalgia for the bygone Socialist days. One of the reasons is that in the Socialist system, these societies were already aware of their colonial status and humiliation due to the Soviet occupation. Being oppressed and then nostalgic about an earlier, albeit different form of, oppression would indeed be strange. The schism in relation to the West and efforts to merge with it in any function once again followed old, imperial borders. An interesting example is Ukraine, which was divided in its political preferences not only in accordance with the Russian population distribution during the Soviet years, but also along the older Austro-Hungarian borders with Russia. The Baltic countries provide another complex example: although they are unhappy about the harsh economic problems they now face and about the mass-migration of their populations to Western Europe, they are reluctant to revise their attitude that the Soviet occupation caused all of the problems. The Baltic littoral continues to see Germany and the Scandinavian countries as an El Dorado for the Baltic postsocialist migrants, even if their motherlands historically have had quite a painful and complex predicament of internal European colonization initiated by these same Western European role models (Kalnačs 2016a).

The situation of the non-European post-Soviet former colonies—in Central Asia and in the southern Caucasus (with the significant exception of Georgia)—is much different. Here the postcolonial and decolonial discourses of any political kind are tabooed, because the symbolic power and influence of the failed Soviet empire remained quite significant there until very recently. Therefore, any critique of Russian and Soviet expansionism is banned. In many cases it has also continued until now. Sympathies have often stayed on the Russian side and lingered in the mutual past, even if this past was highly mythologized and invented. In many cases this was

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1 a tactical position more than a sincere belief. And only the latest serious
2 economic crises, international isolation, and the terminal decline of the
3 Janus-faced empire (Tlostanova 2003),² which is now hastily swapping its
4 masks, shifted the situation in a drastic way. As a result, the Central Asian
5 and Caucasus states and regions, some of which are still formally part of
6 the Russian Federation, started looking for other partners and coalitions,
7 including those in the Middle and Far East—the partners, which before
8 used to be kept in reserve as the association with the old Russian and Soviet
9 metropolis was simpler and, possibly, safer.

10 In the non-European post-Soviet former colonies and in the Russian
11 Federation itself, art seems to be among the very few remaining ways to
12 reflect critically on the intersection of the decolonial and de-Sovietizing
13 impulses. No postcolonial or much less decolonial revisionist models have
14 been allowed to go into circulation, and in the context of the Russian Fed-
15 eration's annexation of Crimea in 2014, theorists, politicians, and activists
16 have been cut off from the use of any such potentially dissident tools. In
17 the latest Russian reactionary wave, the old familiar logic is reproduced: as
18 in the time of Leo Tolstoy, art, once again, fulfills the function of the miss-
19 ing, strangled, or co-opted critical social theory, philosophy, and political
20 activism. The list of artists performing the important tasks of critical reflec-
21 tion includes, among others, Evgeny Antufiev, Aslan Gaisumov, Vladimir
22 Dubossarsky, Shifra Kazhdan, Sergey and Tatyana Kostrikov, Taus Makh-
23 acheva, Anton Nikolayev, Anatoly Osmolovsky, Pyotr Pavlensky, Timofey
24 Radya, Egor Rogalev, Anna Titova, and Alexander Vinogradov.

25 The most doomed situation is in Russia itself, which has suffered under
26 the imperial difference syndrome for several centuries (certainly long be-
27 fore it attempted to build state Socialism). Russia strove to fit into the logic
28 of catching up and tried to build a separate Socialist modernity, with its
29 own coloniality sharing the main premises of modernity at large, such
30 as racism, Orientalism, progressivism, the rhetoric of salvation, a fixation
31 on newness, asymmetrical divisions of labor—that is, generally the colo-
32 niality of being, gender, knowledge, and sensibility. The Russian empire
33 was dominated culturally, technologically, intellectually, and in other ways
34 by the core European countries, yet it subsumed other peripheral spaces,
35 making it a clear case of semiperipherality.

36 The lighter side of Soviet modernity was grounded in ideological and
37 social differences that were used to build human hierarchies. Its darker
38 colonial side mostly reiterated the nineteenth century racist clichés and

human taxonomies mixed with hastily adapted historical materialist dogmas. Today's Russia is still nonhomogeneous, and the restarting of its "parade of sovereignties" is threatening to dismantle the country forever. Secessionism inside the Russian Federation is not only ethnic, cultural, and religious but also clearly economic, as it is linked with an uneven regional redistribution of resources, with the pillage of the provinces in favor of Moscow, with the articulation and development of often militant regional identities and ultimately, with their urge to become independent. The latter tendency can be witnessed in the cases of Altay, Tatarstan, the Volga region, and Yakutia, as well as parts of Siberia, and has already become the focus of attention of several contemporary art activists.

The concept of internal colonization, which has become popular thanks to Alexander Etkind's book *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (2011), is now acquiring a different and less historically and contextually bound meaning, which Etkind himself may have not intended. He compared Russian serfs to African American slaves and Amerindians, pointing out the lack of racial difference between masters and serfs in the case of Russia and claiming that the category of "estate" acted as a substitute for race. Rather the whole Russian model can be viewed as a case of zoological coloniality, following the nineteenth-century Siberian dissident Afanasy Shchapov (1906), to whom Etkind devoted one of the best chapters of his book. Shchapov meant a parallel annihilation of fur-providing animals and the indigenous people who were forced to hunt those animals, under pain of death, during the early colonization of Siberia. Today this model of dehumanizing and equating human lives with mere instruments of thoughtless natural resource extraction covers the entire population of the Russian Federation, regardless of our ethnic/racial, class, and religious belonging.

Once again, the Janus-faced empire is trapped between its two masks: the servile visage that, following Frantz Fanon's logic (1967), could be identified as Russian faces and Western masks; and a patronizing mask meant for Russia's own, non-European eastern and southern colonies and former colonies. Today this configuration is complicated and changed in a new geopolitical situation in which the lives of ordinary citizens of all religions and ethnicities are seen as dispensable. At the present moment when a handful of Russian state oligarchs have already completely pillaged the remnants of the Soviet economy (which was not the most efficient but still was created by the collective efforts of the Soviet people, not by a handful of properly connected tycoons) and pumped the profit into their foreign bank

1 accounts, and when oil and gas production stopped to be sufficiently gainful,
2 they turned to looting the deprived population as the only remaining source
3 of easy profit and to physical elimination of both the weak and the dissatisfied.
4

5
6 **I Come from Nowhere, or Back to the Same Sensibility after**
7 **Twenty-Five Years**

8 Today, dwelling in a quiet Swedish town I am often reflecting on the fact
9 that more than half of my life took place in the post-Soviet waiting and
10 survival room from which there is obviously no way out and that has slowly
11 turned into a place to wait for the other world beyond life and death. This is
12 probably the main human existential result of twenty-five post-Soviet years.
13 I indicate them with two very personal milestones which nevertheless are
14 directly connected with the gist of the post-Soviet human condition.

15 In the year of the Soviet Union's quiet collapse I was an exchange stu-
16 dent in the United States. After my study abroad program I was going back
17 home and I realized that I had a passport from a nonexistent state: the
18 USSR. Certainly I was allowed to leave the United States,—albeit with an
19 ironic smile—and let into the newly established Russian Federation with
20 a habitual gloomy suspicion. Moreover, Soviet foreign passports remained
21 valid for almost ten years after the collapse because there were simply too
22 many passport blanks previously produced with a typical Soviet imperial
23 grandeur and planning economy zeal. They had to be used in spite of the
24 fact that no such country existed any more. But while I was standing in the
25 passport control line at the poorly lit and dirty Sheremetyevo International
26 Airport—which was only starting to be filled with exiles and refugees,
27 the bits and pieces of empire striving to break free from its still tenacious
28 hands—I suddenly felt that for us, the holders of such passports, the very
29 passage of time had changed. The sea of time almost palpably went around
30 us and left us behind, discarded in some cases as if we were fish suffocating
31 on a dry, sandy shore. Twenty-five years have passed, and today the same
32 sense of disintegration is clearly in the air once again. And I have no idea
33 what will await me if I decide use my now Russian passport sometime in
34 the near future to visit my place of birth. Could recent history repeat itself
35 so soon, especially since we have never learned its lessons?

36 The past twenty-five post-Soviet years have been marked by a strange re-
37 verse logic for former inhabitants of the USSR, a logic that falls outside the
38

usual modern progressivism, typical for the relations of the global North and South. We woke up one day to find ourselves in a new condition that was chosen for us by someone else. It was a condition of a dinosaur that somehow did not die in due time and had to languish in the back yards of history, which at that point indeed seemed to have reached its climax and come to a standstill in the eternal consumerist paradise. Yet even those Soviet people who honestly believed in their opportunity to change and join the world, and who hastily started working toward this condition, soon realized that the road from our own history into the real world was quite long and hard, and maybe it was even a dead-end.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
We woke up to a new reality of multiple dependencies and increased unfreedoms in which the previous Soviet unfreedom was not at all lifted, but, on the contrary soon acquired new forms that combined economic exploitation with the lack of rights and renewed ideological control. That is, although the external forms changed, conditions remained the same in their repressive essence. In fact, it was a story of the suddenly cancelled Socialist modernity that left its voluntary and involuntary participants and agents in ruin and unable to rejoin history. According to one respondent in <i>Secondhand Time</i> (2013, 91), by the Nobel Prize-winning author Svetlana Alexievich, “Socialism has ended, but we are still here.” The post-Soviet people became equivalents of a losing race and bound to disappear or merge with the global South.	11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22
The Soviet immigrant Boris Groys, now a social and art theorist in Germany, stresses the paradoxical direction of the path taken by most post-socialist countries: “The post-Communist subject travels the same route as described by the dominating discourse of cultural studies—but he or she travels this route in the opposite direction, not from the past to the future, but from the future to the past; from the end of history . . . back to historical time. Post-Communist life is life lived backward, a movement against the flow of time” (Groys 2008, 155). Groys thinks that the state Socialist modernity in a sense was a leap <i>against</i> the course of the world history, an attempt to transcend it. The more difficult and crashing it became for us to be later sent back to the usual course, speed and direction of history and to change the radical Socialist progressivist model to a milder version of the forever unattainable Western ideal; why we continue to plod slowly and endlessly along instead of leaving the drudgery behind and leaping into the new and wonderful future in one jump. This shift was interpreted	23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38

1 by many people as a way backward, and used by the neo-imperial ideol-
2 ogues as a justification of their revanchist appetites. In purely religious
3 or secular Soviet forms, the Russian empire had always aimed at taking a
4 revenge for the losing battle with the West and ultimately erasing the impe-
5 rial difference.

6 The state of being expelled from history reiterated the general logic of
7 modernity, with its habitual operation of translating geography into chrono-
8 nology (Mignolo 2000) and assigning whole groups of people living in
9 the non-Western spaces to other times or, rather, positioning them outside
10 the only sanctioned course of time and the only appropriate way of life. Yet
11 in the post-Soviet case, it was not the downtrodden premodern “savages”
12 on whom the Western modernity could practice its civilizing discourses.
13 Rather, it was an other state Socialist modernity which failed and was sub-
14 sequently rendered nonviable, while its voluntary and involuntary practi-
15 tioners had to be instructed on how to become fully modern (in the only
16 remaining neoliberal way) and, ultimately, fully human. The progressivist
17 paradigm has had an inbuilt feature of always keeping a sufficient lag be-
18 tween the modernizing catching-up ex-Socialists and the first rate Western/
19 Northern subjects.

20 Soon it became clear that post-Soviet people seemingly sent to the end of
21 the queue, in fact, were simply squeezed out of history, because the catch-
22 ing-up would never end in overtaking. We found ourselves in the void, in
23 a problematic locale inhabited by problem people. And it was this situation
24 of having nothing to lose that shaped today’s dangerous postimperial *res-*
25 *sentiment*. Yet in speaking about a generalized postsocialist person, Groys
26 neglects the colonial difference inside the external imperial difference—
27 the darker side of (post-)Soviet modernity marked by Orientalism, racism,
28 othering, and forced assimilation—and indirectly denies the fact that Soviet
29 progressivism meant one thing for Russians and something else for Uzbeks
30 and Georgians. Thus, their present trajectories cannot be parallel or identi-
31 cal by definition.

32 As stated earlier, the hidden Russian inferiority complexes typical of
33 external imperial difference have led from time to time to lapses into impe-
34 rial jingoism and revanchism that have now reached an extreme manifesta-
35 tion in which a new political identity is being made out of stigmatization.
36 In other words, Russia is effectively saying, “If the West calls me barbarous,
37 I will behave so.” In the past several years, this sentiment has been accentu-
38



FIG. INTRO.1 Egor Rogalev, *Situation No. 2*. Odessa, 2011. Archival photographic print in various editions; dimensions variable. From the photo series *Synchronicity*. Courtesy of the artist.

ated and cultivated more and more frequently in the official Russian discourses, stressing that Russia is not Europe, and elevating the previously marginal neo-Eurasianism to an almost official state ideology.

The Russian Wolf in Postcolonial Sheep's Clothing

In its present hysterically aggressive stage, Russia is trying to jump out of the catching-up model, in which it has existed at least since the seventeenth-century reign of Peter the Great, and trying to make the world stop viewing the imperial difference as a colonial difference, thus turning itself once again into a respectable partner for the global North. This very impulse is quite deceiving as it does not try to question the logic of modernity/coloniality as such, but merely alters Russia's position in it. This humble goal is camouflaged as anticolonial pathos and a critique of the West,

1 which is skillfully used by the Russian administration to brainwash a popu-
2 lation that is already distracted by serious economic and social problems
3 and marked by “defuturing” tendencies (Fry 2011, 21). This imperial ap-
4 propriation of postcolonial rhetoric also targets the Western left, who reflect
5 on the Russian situation from safe positions and often praise President Vladi-
6 mir Putin’s escapades for their anti-Americanism. However, that position re-
7 mains blind to the fate of those at whose expense the dangerous neo-imperial
8 attacks are made. It erases political and economic repression, increased pov-
9 erty, completely destroyed social state, and the looming extinction of a huge
10 country that has become a hostage to its insane and reckless regime.

11 It is not possible to separate the Russian face from its underside. And the
12 same way as modernity is not possible without its darker colonial side,
13 the second-rate imperial *démarches* and efforts to carve a safer space in
14 the modern/colonial system are impossible without infringing on human
15 rights and looting their own populations, the would-be citizens who are ob-
16 jectified, once again, as the instruments of the zoological economy. As a trade
17 commodity, fur was simply replaced for a while by oil; now it is the turn of the
18 population itself to be sacrificed and skinned by the state. After the last bits of
19 property are taken away from the animalized subjects of the collapsing regime,
20 the depopulated territory most likely will cease to be interesting to anybody—
21 most of all, to its own power elites. Therefore, the ugly and scary mask of the
22 imperial Janus, which once was turned in the direction of the non-European
23 colonies, today is turned toward every citizen, whether they are applauding the
24 neo-imperial rhetoric or prefer their refrigerators to television sets.

25 The Russian imperial difference, characterized by the empire’s status
26 on the second tier and the constant presence of stronger Western rivals,
27 has generated multiple colonial differences among its colonized subjects,
28 which might actually find colonization by a first-rate empire more attrac-
29 tive.³ It is important to understand how this configuration is evolving in
30 the world in relation to other, more global processes; how the post-Soviet
31 people revolt against an obvious injustice of the modern power asymmetry
32 but often do so in dangerous rightist, revanchist forms that are carefully
33 planted by state ideologues to later make food for powder out of its own
34 citizens in neoimperial military operations such as the infamous denied war
35 with Ukraine.⁴ Those who disagree also find themselves in a paradoxical situ-
36 ation both inside and outside the country: while abroad, we are often still
37 held responsible for the sins of Putin’s regime, while at home we are branded
38 as a “fifth column” and persecuted as traitors and foreign agents.

Today the Russia Federation's state ideologues are desperately feeding the impoverished population with an unappetizing soup of discourses drawn from imperial narratives that are quite different both contextually and temporally. They range from almost theocratic statist models of sacred geography superseding geopolitics, grounded in the sanctification of the state and the ruler and aggressive territorial expansionism masked by various spiritual justifications, to revivalism of the Socialist and, particularly, Stalinist "grandeur," which attempts to glue disjointed and emaciated people spread over a gigantic and unmanageable territory together via memories of military valor and sports and space-exploration accomplishments of the Soviet *époque*. But efforts to reanimate national and imperial mythological consciousness have not been particularly successful. Their main axis—the invented interconnection between Russia's territorial vastness and its grandeur—is increasingly shattered by growing secessionist sensibilities and the development of regional identities and imaginaries in various parts of the country. They feel themselves as the new old colonies of Moscow, and more and more actively discuss different possibilities of separation and survival on their own or with the help of different partners—from Western Europe to China and Iran. One more imperial card that is now being played, is the Russian language as a unifying force. Appeals to a linguistic unity of the "Russian world" are present in various neo-imperial agendas—right, left and centrist—from Alexander Dugin to present day National Bolsheviks.

Another recurrent element of Russian imperial mythology is the false narrative of Russia as a savior of suffering nations. This myth is still successfully employed in imperial propaganda for both Russians and a number of presumably liberated people, such as those in several countries of the former Yugoslavia and in Bulgaria, who juxtapose the imagined Orthodox Slavic community with a demonized Ottoman yoke. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the tragic and shameful events that followed in Ukraine and Syria (and the preceding neoimperial war in Georgia) were grounded in similar false arguments of defending the Russians or their brother nations living in someone else's territory or destroying civilians under the pretext of fighting terrorism. At first, many post-Soviet people took this rationale at face value, having fished out of their unconscious the all too familiar conservative and revanchist servility and a sickening allegiance to those in power, which still lie very close to the surface. Yet today's Soviet renaissance is another simulacrum, an empty shell with no meaning, a playful revival of Stalinist Russia, where mortal fear and deadly conviction

1 are normalized once again, but go hand in hand with cynical corruption,
2 demagogic invectives, and typical arguments of timeservers living out of
3 their suitcases. Artists were the first to detect and critically address this
4 falseness, such as the Ukrainian poet Serhiy Zhadan, the Russian writer
5 Vladimir Sorokin, the directors Kirill Serebrennikov and Andrey Zvyagintsev,
6 the Georgian novelist Zaza Burchuladze, and the Crimean film director
7 and activist Oleg Sentsov, and others.

8 9 10 **The Black Legend, Russian/Soviet-Style**

11 In our effort to understand the evolution of the external imperial difference
12 today, we should take into account that at every stage of its evolution it has
13 been marked by the logic of the Leyenda Negra (black legend),⁵ which was
14 well tested in the rivalry between the British and Spanish empires. “Black
15 legendism” also flourishes in Russia today, and no one has yet attempted to
16 problematize it. The Janus-faced empire represents itself as good, spiritual,
17 kind, and fair, in opposition to its Western and non-Western rivals. This is
18 expressed in Russia’s habitual stigmatization of the double standards of the
19 West. Yet these accusations themselves are grounded in morally dubious
20 and logically flawed assumptions that exempt Russia from the zone of re-
21 sponsibility for its own actions—that is, if the West does not comply with its
22 own laws and rules and if it violates human rights, why should Russia bother
23 to comply with international law? However, on the global scale, it does not
24 matter who violates human rights—European countries, the United States,
25 or Russia, who could trigger a global disaster. What does matter is how we
26 can learn to live together in this world without infringing on other people’s
27 rights and then justifying it by pointing our accusing fingers at others.

28 Strangely enough, the logic of self-justification by accusing others is
29 supported by many leftist intellectuals who do not seem to be aware of the
30 fact that discarding the legitimacy of international law—however imper-
31 fect it is as such or how irregularly it is implemented—could easily lead
32 us to destruction and violence for their own sake or as an intimidation
33 tool. But does it really make sense to blackmail the international commu-
34 nity with constant military threats? If so, we will soon have a Hobbesian
35 society of war of all against all. Or maybe we already live in that society.
36 Would it not be better to abstain from claiming that everyone is equal in
37 violating the laws and instead act maturely by trying to formulate laws, and
38 global mechanisms for their implementation, that would not infringe on

anyone's rights? We have to find a global way of negotiating our common future on this planet in order to have any future at all. And the global coloniality needs to be globally dismantled instead of trying to carve a better space in its perverse hierarchy or paying it back with equal violence and lawlessness.

Alas, the external imperial difference continues to reproduce the black legend logic at all stages of its evolution. Thus, Russia applies a technique of looking for Western faults while ignoring or shadowing its own deficiencies. This has occurred throughout history and could take constructive forms of borrowing and improving the Western accomplishments. As the semiotician Yuri Lotman has demonstrated, with the Byzantine Empire acting as an equivalent of the West, Russian thinkers claimed a better understanding and implementation of Greek doctrine than the original Orthodox Christian Church. Later, Russian interpreters of the French enlightenment once again claimed they better understood the main principles than the French. The Bolsheviks also borrowed their main tenets from Western socialist and communist doctrines and then altered them to suit their purposes and presented this alteration as an improvement (Lotman 2002, 273).

The false mythology of the Russian/Soviet imperial liberating mission has also acquired the form of a "black legend" and was grounded in the opposition of Russia, presumably helping other nations break free of evil and mercenary Western empires, which were oppressing poor people in India, Africa, and the Americas. The Russian religious philosopher Vladimir Solovyev pointed this out in 1888 by drawing attention to the double standards of the Janus-faced empire:

We wanted to liberate Serbia and Bulgaria, but at the same time we continued to oppress Poland. This system of oppression is bad in itself, but it becomes much worse due to the crying discrepancy with liberating ideals and disinterested help that Russian politics has always claimed to be its style and its exclusive right. These politics are necessarily drenched in lying and hypocrisy that take away any prestige. . . . One cannot—with perfect impunity—write on his banner the freedom of all Slavs and other people while simultaneously taking national freedom away from the Poles; religious freedom away from the Uniats and Russian religious dissenters; [and] civil rights away from the Jews. (Solovyev 2002, 247–48).

1 These words are still true today. In accordance with this double standard,
2 Russia continues to “liberate” nations in order to colonize them or make
3 them useful in establishing or reconfirming its geopolitical dominance. The
4 lack of any collective repentance or massive intellectual de-imperialization
5 are contributing to Russia’s defeat today.
6

7 **The Perishable Soviet Renaissance Minus the Future**

8
9 The fact that we cannot bury the past and start living in the present is
10 linked not only to our acquiescence to being made into victims once again
11 but also to our inability and unwillingness to think critically and finally
12 shelve Soviet modernity/coloniality in an archive or museum. Easily re-
13 vived inferiority complexes, together with memories of imperial grandeur
14 and the deification of power in its personalized forms that equate the ruler,
15 the state, and the country, are immediately channeled by imperial ideol-
16 ogues and their mass-media henchmen to prolong the agony of the regime
17 and prevent the collapse of the falling empire for a little longer.

18 The reanimation of the Soviet modernity project—which in essence, if not
19 in its form continued the aggressive messianism of Russian Orthodoxy—is
20 being used to extend the fragile status quo. And the belt-tightening rhetoric
21 with universal justice as its fake goal seems to switch on in the collective
22 unconscious memories of earlier liberating discourses: from the biblical
23 “the last shall be first” to *L’Internationale’s* “We are nothing; let us be all.”
24 But an important difference, or even a deliberate deception, is at work
25 here: no one today is promising happiness even in the distant future, to say
26 nothing of the possibility of any future per se. If the Soviet discourse used
27 to present the ideal future as an open and unrestrained utopia, at least until
28 the mid1960s when it became obvious that communism would not come
29 any time soon and the Soviet ideology shifted toward the past.

30 Yet at the core of state Socialist utopianism for a long time stood the
31 idea of universal happiness and consequently the happy future. It is true
32 that way too soon utopia became sealed and exclusionary. But the social
33 contract of the Soviet people was in many ways linked to this imagined
34 future happiness that they were offered to exchange for the hardships and
35 difficulties of their present. Today the belt-tightening rhetoric is not com-
36 pensated any more by any promise of the universal happiness in near or
37 distant future. What we are offered instead is merely a symbolic compensa-
38 tion in the form of phantasmal superiority. The worn out victory-in-defeat

discourse and the inevitable post-apocalyptic triumph, in the Russian case are transferred entirely to the spiritual realm or even to hereafter. Those who do not believe in the other world ruin themselves by drink or leave this forcefully galvanized dead world for good⁶. It is not surprising therefore that the lion's share of artists, writers and film directors in contemporary Russia work with dystopian genres.

The favorite cliché of Russian media borrowed from one of President Putin's speeches, likens the country to a slave who after twenty-five years is finally getting up from his knees. Yet few options are being left open for the slave who has been deceived into believing that economic stagnation and lack of prospects for the future mean liberation from the West. It is really a choice between the slow and miserable vegetation and survival in the shrinking and stagnant economy, and the all-too-familiar Russian "meaningless and merciless revolt" (Pushkin 1960, 387), which would be immediately suppressed by the masters. Therefore, the shelf life of false liberation discourses such as the Kremlin's current imitation of ideology is quite short.

Those who used to be nothing at all times—before the 1917 Revolution, in the USSR, under Yeltsin and Putin—are more and more aware of the deception of the false exchange imposed on them by those in power. But what can they really do, and how can they really influence the political, social, or any other sphere of life in Russia today? This bitter awareness of the impossibility to change anything is perhaps the most hopeless feature of contemporary Russian social and political reality. However, even the simplest consumerist and previously pro-status quo minds have started to demonstrate signs of doubt. Those who were ready to exchange their rights and freedoms for a relative economic well-being and the infamous deadening stability, which was replaced far too quickly with state-of-emergency rhetoric, are not happy anymore, and this emerging new reality cannot be ignored.

When I was writing the first draft of this introduction, one of the central Moscow streets—Tverskaya—was blocked by protesters. They were not hungry medical doctors or teachers, starving retirees or miners as it happened in the 1990s. They were relatively well-off middle-class people who took bank loans in hard currency because the interest rate was lower than the ruble mortgage. With the rapid devaluation of the ruble, in which their salaries are paid, they have lost everything. One can accuse them of greed and say that this is their own problem. However, it is revealing that these middle-class victims of devaluation understand the direct relationship between the state's predatory politics and their own personal problem with the

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1 banks. A video shown often on social media networks features a desperate
2 woman wearing a mink coat yelling from a picket line across Tverskaya,
3 which leads to the Kremlin, “Maybe we should give Crimea back—do we
4 really need it?” Crimea is indeed needed only symbolically, and the destiny
5 of the Crimean people once again demonstrates Russia’s typical treatment
6 of human beings as expendable material.⁷ It is more important to destroy
7 the enemy than to save the hostages, civilians or soldiers. The lacking
8 rights paradigm and dispensability of human lives have remained the main
9 features of the Russian imperial difference.

10 To describe the nature of nationalism, Benedict Anderson (1983, 86) ap-
11 plied the metaphor of the narrow skin of the nation-state that is too small
12 to cover the body of the old empire. In the case of the Russian/Soviet em-
13 pire, this metaphor was further twisted as in the end the old skin was re-
14 moved and the new one never appeared. Or rather, a number of the pieces
15 of the old empire attempted to reuse fragments of the old (Soviet) skin by
16 renovating it with ersatz ethnic-national ornaments but, in fact, keeping
17 the old Marxist stagist paradigm intact. (A good example is Uzbekistan,
18 whose recently deceased President Islam Karimov managed to preserve
19 a hybrid Soviet-feudal regime for almost three decades.) Russia itself has
20 long been in a vulnerable and unstable position, unable to weave itself new
21 clothes or recycle its old ones. Soon it became clear that the bombastic in-
22 novation initiatives always clash again the persistent Soviet-Russian rigid
23 structures and post-Soviet cynical corruption, leading to nothing. Today
24 the half-collapsed empire is being hastily covered with this worn out cloth
25 marked by a serious cognitive dissonance of harsh neoliberal logic, dusted
26 with fundamentalist nationalist and imperial rhetoric which is worded in a
27 distinctly populist way (Matveyev 2016).

28 There is no teleology and no point of arrival anymore. And no one is
29 ready to suffer in this world or in their lifetime for the sake of some abstract
30 utopian happiness of the future generations or even of some otherworldly
31 bliss. The resource of waiting for the wonderful future in the conditions
32 of present deprivation and humiliation is completely exhausted. History
33 did not end after all; it bypassed us. The vastness of space almost always
34 prevailed over time in Russian history (except during a few swooping and
35 mobilizing efforts to force history to jump); today, the preeminence of
36 wilderness that was never properly cultivated or tamed is coming forward
37 once again. As post-Soviet Russia falls out of modernity, in its Western and
38 Soviet versions, it is coming to a standstill.

Although the post-Soviet societies have lived in a state of crisis for the past twenty-five years, the present crisis is rapidly turning into a crisis of legitimacy in which epistemic, existential, and cultural—not just social, economic, and political—elements come forward, reinforcing anomie, dissociation, and extreme willy-nilly individualism among the inhabitants of the collapsing empire. This is a peculiar form of individualism that is grounded not in human or civic dignity or responsibility but in sheer physical survival of the poor and deprived as they come face to face with the hostile world and repressive state-oligarchic capitalism. In spite of all propagandistic clichés and false myths imposed from the inside and outside, today’s post-Soviet everyman is not the proverbial Socialist collectivist or a proponent of the Russian *sobornost* as a utopian “communal” ideal, opposed to liberal “commonwealth” and Marxist “commons.” These confused people, who just a few months ago proudly wore their patriotic Saint George’s ribbons and were capable of uniting only against someone but not for anything, suddenly are ready to fight collectively for economic and social well-being and demand that the power they have always supported finally fulfill its part of the social contract.

The inflated paroxysms of patriotism by the dying Russian state are in fact efforts to fill a vacuum of beliefs with empty semantics and artificially unite the dissociated masses under the banner of some fragile collective identity, even though they share little more than growing repression, common territory, and language. Such enforced reunifications are tactical and essentially short term, which the imperial ideologues realize better than anyone else. The infusion of neoimperial ideology and policies are needed only until those in power can finish their marauding projects and escape, leaving the nonviable *homo post-soveticus* to perish and make room for other communities.

In *Secondhand Time*, Alexievich attempts to understand what constitutes our post-Soviet existential condition. In interview after interview, she reveals recycled, secondhand beliefs and experiences that do not help to build anything new in the ruins. Today Alexievich’s metaphor will acquire even more sinister overtones because the secondhand time of the Socialist modernity is being miraculously resurrected in the most sickening elements of the authentic Soviet reality. Yet it is a repetition with a difference: in the original Soviet world, everything was deadly serious, including the peoples’ genuine, and hence more powerful and terrifying, feelings and beliefs. Soviet people went easily to their doom for the grand ideals, however false. Today’s Russian citizens, by contrast, are offered only a bad theatrical



FIG. INTRO.2 Egor Rogalev, *Situation No. 29*. Moscow, 2011. Archival photographic print in various editions; dimensions variable. From the photo series *Synchronicity*. Courtesy of the artist.

performance—a cocktail of Stalinism and fascism with strong Orthodox Christian and fundamentalist nationalist ferment.

The Soviet utopia always retained a powerful element of messianism and the utopian teleology of building a new and wonderful world. Consequently, future stood in the center of its grand narrative. It was a special future equally happy for everyone and built to last forever, even if the Soviet state wanted to make everyone happy by force without asking their opinion. This hope supported the exhausted people for a while in the 1990s, allowing to believe in the possibility of future changes and the necessity of enduring hardship for the sake of the wonderful tomorrow. The revival of imperial rhetoric today cannot persuade anyone because it lacks an essential feeling of stability, the confidence of coming and staying forever in which the Soviet *époque* was grounded before. Today’s return of the Soviet rhetoric is a case of a “bad faith” from the start. It is a conscious self-deceptive technique or, in Lewis Gordon’s understanding, a rethinking of the Sartrean *mauvaise-foi*: “bad faith which is such because it in effect is an effort to perform a variety of

contradictions the consequence of which requires lying to ourselves, making ourselves believe what we don't believe, using our freedom to deny it, asserting the very human effort at human evasion" (Gordon 2000, 157).

The present appeals to tighten belts or die in the service of someone else's interests in the multiple wars in which Russia is engaging as it follows its petty imperialist and short-term tactical agendas and bullies the West with fake criminal style hysteria are needed only to distract attention from one more episode of money laundering or economic failure. These appeals, however, almost never call for a wonderful future in any foreseeable time or in this material world, much less for any egalitarian future as it was the case in the USSR—at least on paper. The present administration realizes that no one would believe in such promises any more. The wonderful future is cancelled, and by way of compensation we are offered to be happy with the symbolic victory over the imagined enemies, and practice spiritual and religious superiority and aggressive Messianic zeal, uncompensated with anything in this material world. People deprived of any future, do not cherish their lives and therefore are easily manipulated and become potentially dangerous. Not surprisingly, many discourses popular in contemporary Russia revolve around eschatological premonitions with an accent on the dream of a new paradise with its center in Russia. In fact, this is the logic of a fanatical sect whose victims and hostages in this case are the whole population of a still large postimperial country which is sick with a syndrome of the lacking future and missing hope.

We are not even sure if this future would ever come. But what is to be done in such a situation, is something everyone decides for themselves. Knowing that victory is impossible and our efforts to fight are doomed, at least in the near future, makes some of us leave the country and others reconcile and busy themselves with mere survival. But there are also those who continue to speak up and act against, knowing that they will never win yet also rejecting the continuation of the slavish existence. Even today there are spheres in which decolonial thinkers are able to continue their internal activism, which is destructive to the existing deadening system and aimed at future existential resurgence—and, eventually, the emergence of a freer individual who can enter a dynamic correlational network with other people and the nonhuman world. This is a meticulous and step-by-step work on decolonizing people's minds and bodies and offering them different options and various optics of looking at the world and at themselves from the critical edge of modernity and coloniality. This

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1 could potentially lead to independent thinking, and to new coalitions
2 grounded not in ideology or stale geopolitics, but in other alter-global
3 modes of thinking and being marked by a realization of our common
4 destiny as humans and striving to build a world in which no one would be
5 an “other” anymore.
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7 **Art as an Effective Decolonial Force**

9 This book focuses on a specific kind of decoloniality linked with percep-
10 tive mechanisms of aesthesis and further shaping not only of aesthetic and
11 ethical but also, inevitably, of political stances and agency that may become
12 powerful mechanisms in decolonizing thinking, being, sensing, and corpor-
13 ality. After analyzing various spheres of decoloniality in the past decade, I
14 have come to the conclusion that contemporary activist art that is closely
15 connected with corporality and affectivity—and, consequently, with the in-
16 tersection and problematizing of epistemic and ontological links—is the
17 area in which the most effective decolonial models emerge. It is this sphere
18 that gives some hope for the post-Soviet future.

19 Unfortunately, the nature of the post-Soviet regimes—and particularly
20 of Russia—is for the state either to crush or to co-opt any direct forms
21 of social and political protest. Activists who do make it into public space
22 are generally unable to offer radically decolonizing agendas. Instead, they
23 continue to exist within the old logic of political parties and movements,
24 which tend to be highly ineffective in the struggle against global and local
25 forms of coloniality. Moreover, openly political movements are immedi-
26 ately persecuted, and critical social and political thought—even that which
27 is purely theoretical—is banned, marginalized, or forced into exile.

28 Activism-cum-art—or “artivism” (Nikolayev 2011)—practices are be-
29 coming more effective in the conditions of the impasse and stagnation of
30 most social protest movements unable to influence the economic or politi-
31 cal decisions. The artistic influence seems less immediate than any open
32 social or political dissent, yet it slowly works for the implementation of the
33 future radical changes through altering our thinking, and setting our con-
34 sciousness free from the global neoliberal or local jingoistic brainwashing.
35 Art in its visual, verbal and synthetic forms remains a crucial intersection
36 of being and knowledge and it is in the sphere of aesthesis untouched by
37 any normative aesthetic distortions that the most promising decolonizing
38 models start to emerge.

Activist art does not, however, exist in inherently safe space. It is also subject to repression. But it has at least two advantages: art is metaphorical by definition and therefore slips more easily out of power's grip; and the vagueness of metaphors, along with their ability to multiply often contradictory meanings allows artists adjusting to new censorship and double-think situations.

According to Judith Butler (1997, 15), censorship is always ineffective and unsuccessful from the start because any utterance is always multi-semantic, particularly in the realms of art, fiction, film, and the humanities, where the multiplicity of interpretations is axiomatic. At the same time, open protests against censorship do not always solve the problem as they cannot shatter the system as such. On the contrary, we then build ourselves into the system and play according to its rules, instead of overcoming the system through its subversion from the inside or delinking from the system and creating something independent. The advantage of art is that it is able to discuss the utmost questions without sliding into obvious propaganda and open and univocal political engagement.

Indirect protest tactics and strategies of undermining power structures from within have become well developed in postcolonial, posttotalitarian, and postdictatorship art. Even Soviet censorship was an interactive process, grounded in a peculiar and complex complicity of the censor and the censored. Censorship obviously "inhibited and provoked . . . authors" (Levine 1995, 2). It also acted as an impetus for stylistic innovation among artists and helped develop in audiences a heightened sensitivity to the hidden and the implied. The censor is always tormented by the "monologic terror of indeterminacy" (Holquist 1994, 22) because it is not possible to fix meanings once and for all, to cement interpretation in unequivocal aesthetic, political, or ethical ways. Multiplicity of interpretations, complex interconnection of negation and assertion in any censorship, and reiteration as its main principle, lead to restating of the very utterances censorship seeks to banish.

There are certainly many opposite examples of the obvious repressions against the activist artists such as Pyotr Pavlensky, Pussy Riot, activist art festival Media Impact, or Vyacheslav Akhunov. But art still has more chances to avoid the punishment of repressive systems and offer a wider specter of interpretations and opinions than any purely political and rationalized forms of protest. In contrast with social theory, the immediate and often nonrational affective form of art, is able to better and faster convey the vague and undefined sensibilities of protest and affirmation of another way of being that social theorists cannot formulate using their bulky and

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1 slowly changing methodological apparatus—or that they are afraid to for-
2 mulate as they remain loyal to their rigid disciplinary frames.

3 Obviously, contemporary art seldom appeals to mass audiences even if
4 the majority of artists I will refer to in the book are far from being elitist
5 or living in any ivory tower. They are able to actively engage with the criti-
6 cally thinking part of the educated and responsible people, who still reside
7 in the postsocialist countries. These are the people who attend exhibitions
8 of contemporary art and are ready to discover something new and relate it
9 to their own experience. Such art initiatives are often closely linked with
10 social and political movements and protests never completely merging
11 with them.

12 This book offers one possible view of decolonization in post-Soviet aes-
13 thesis. I hope that, in the future, more decolonial reflections on the post-
14 Soviet imaginary will be done via other spheres that are not necessarily
15 connected with art. However, art is the most promising sphere in the real-
16 ization of decoloniality in the present post-Soviet space.

18 **Beyond the TV-Fridge Dichotomy**

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20 The art and artists discussed in this volume offer the exhausted post-Soviet
21 person a way beyond the dichotomy of the tv set and the refrigerator,
22 a way into a different dimension in which there are other notions and be-
23 liefs besides bread and game. They are not proposing to place the tv set
24 inside the empty refrigerator, but rather to delink from this false, imposed
25 logic and see that there are many other options in the world and some of
26 them we can even initiate ourselves and start doing it already now. In this
27 regard, the post-Soviet condition must not be seen as a lamentation of the
28 lost paradise, but rather as a way to re-existence in a changing world in
29 which many worlds would correlate and where the experience of Socialist
30 modernity and its specific trajectory would shape one of the possible open
31 models, intersecting but never entirely merging with others, and where
32 the previous hierarchical relations of the state, the market and the artists
33 would finally give place to other forms of communication, praxis and pro-
34 duction of meanings. The art of the postsocialist world remains an effective
35 means of such a collective cathartic therapy, which is likely to help post-
36 Soviet citizens better understand ourselves and our place in the multiple
37 and complex world in the making and never again slide into the vicious
38 circle of forever dependent existence.

CHAPTER ONE

The Decolonial Sublime

For the post-Soviet human condition that I attempted to sketch briefly in the introduction, contemporary activism grounded in decolonization of the affective sphere and in liberating aesthesis from the limitations of aesthetics, is particularly important and promising for the future. But first, what is meant by “aesthesis,” and what is the difference between aesthetics and aesthesis? The term “aesthetics” was coined by Alexander Baumgarten (1750) to indicate a shift from sensibility to a taste in good art with a specific material and market value, and to a mode of articulation among various forms of agency, production, perception, and thinking. Aesthetics was a new institutionalized philosophical, moral, cultural, and social sphere, which around the early nineteenth century, according to Jacques Rancière (2009), shifted the previous representative regime of art to a contradictory aesthetic one, gradually leading to the demise of art as such, to its dissolving and merging with other activities. Rancière stresses that aesthetics was born during the French Revolution and therefore was bound up with equality, a democratic and liberating spirit that also signaled the future deterioration of art that was grounded in a destruction of previous artistic

1 hierarchies, a dissolving of boundaries between art and life, and also a shift
2 in relations between the passive sensibility and an active understanding of
3 art (Rancière 2009, 37).

4 Rancière (2009, 49) addresses the present reconfiguration of the politi-
5 cal in aesthetic forms and conferring on art the capacity to become an instru-
6 ment of “reframing a sense of community and mending the social bond and
7 time that binds together practices, forms of visibility, and patterns of intel-
8 ligibility.” Conceptualizing his idea of the community of sense as “a certain
9 cutting out of space,” Rancière (2009, 31, 49) claims that “art does not do
10 politics by reaching the real. It does it by inventing fictions that challenge
11 the existing distribution of the real and the fictional. . . . Fiction invents
12 new communities of sense: that is to say, new trajectories between what can
13 be seen, what can be said, and what can be done.” It is hard to reanimate the
14 concept of community in such conditions without equating it to the liberal
15 understanding of the commonwealth or the Marxist idea of the commons.
16 What often remains unaddressed are the models accentuating the aesthetic,
17 sensual aspect of the political and social spheres that go beyond ideology
18 as such. Rancière’s take on aesthetics and politics remains within the uni-
19 versalized Western social and economic realm, but his ideas on contradic-
20 tory political-aesthetic relations find parallels in a number of communal
21 models of indigenous people and decolonial social movements grounded
22 in intersectionality, which surpasses the simplified post-Marxist approach.

23 The term “aesthesis” has a longer implicit genealogy since it refers to
24 an intrinsic human ability. “Aesthesis” literally means an ability to perceive
25 through the senses and the process of sensual perception itself—visual,
26 tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and so on. “Aesthesis” is more familiar to the
27 general public as a Western postmodernist sociological term discussed by,
28 among others, Michel Maffesoli in *The Time of the Tribes* (1988).¹ In this
29 well-known book, Maffesoli starts and departs from an earlier phenom-
30 enological interpretation of aesthesis, as well as a number of nonorthodox
31 sociological theories such as Vilfredo Pareto’s model, to offer an aesthetic
32 ground for his famous idea of the re-enchantment of the world.

33 However, Maffesoli’s understanding—even if liberating and revolution-
34 ary for his time and context—is still limited as it is a critique of modernity
35 from within, from a postmodernist position that is selectively correcting
36 some of modernity’s features but leaving the core and, particularly, its darker
37 colonial side intact. Maffesoli understands aesthesis as a process of total
38 aestheticization of the lifeworld in the collective consciousness of a tribe

(a reunification of ethics and aesthetics). He means a critique of rationality and its replacement with intuitivism, sensuality, and emotional responses and also a critique of individualism and its replacement with new tribalism and group consciousness. Yet Maffesoli's tribes, as well as Deleuze and Guattari's (1993) war machine, are utopian constructions rather than real social groups. Although Maffesoli assumed that the total aestheticization of the lifeworld leads to the emergence of group ethics, empathy, and proximity, and hence provides the possibility for an organic compromise between people, this assumption remains hypothetical. Moreover, the multitude of marginal communities with their presumable spirit of emotional complicity to which Maffesoli appeals, are still Western communities (such as hippies, anarchists, various contemporary experimental artists). They are unhappy with the system and capable of creating a rallying aesthesis as an immanent transcendence.

But in Maffesoli's interpretation, these new tribes are largely confined by contesting Western social movements and neo-avant-garde art. As is known, many such groups were dissatisfied with European philosophical traditions that did not allow one to move away from logocentrism. Therefore, the new tribalists started looking in the direction of Eastern and Amerindian cosmologies and various marginalized occult practices, which in itself was a form of colonization and appropriation of someone else's axiological legacy—a typical and well-rehearsed scenario of modernity. Moreover, this initially sincere revolutionary protest was soon tamed by the system. In fact, it was a doomed attempt to reform the system from within. The new tribalists' interest in the other remained largely an exotic desire to possess the other, not a genuine wish to learn more about this other. Such artificial affective excitement by means of alien cosmological instruments was predictably short-lived. And today, Maffesoli's old new tribes have given way to David Brooks's "Bobos" (2000)—a hybrid of the *bohème* and the bourgeoisie, in which aestheticization of protest has acquired safe and decorative forms. The neoliberal market and commodification mechanisms have easily infected the presumably autonomous artistic sphere and discredited and trivialized any naïve and honest ideals such as community and participation.

The present repoliticization of aesthetics takes place in rather bland and anonymous everyday forms of essentially apolitical practices pretending to be political, often with a focus on communicative and participatory practices and drives. A typical example is Nicolas Bourriaud's problematic relational

1 aesthetics and his altermodern project (Bourriaud 2002b, 2009). Similarly
 2 to Maffesoli three decades ago, Bourriaud attempts to catch and reproduce
 3 the new sensibility assuming that globalization has successfully made this
 4 world homogenous and unified and its subjects have become identical and
 5 equal. Bourriaud sees the darker side of this homogeneity in the image of the
 6 globally standardizing capitalist system yet refuses to notice any power dif-
 7 ferences within it, condescendingly dismissing both postmodernism (as an
 8 outdated ideology and historical narrative) and postcolonialism and identity
 9 politics, which in his view have already fulfilled their obligations (Bourriaud
 10 2009). In this respect he echoes the idea of post-Fordist dissolving of the
 11 previous power hierarchies through an emergence of radical democracy for
 12 the multiplicity of multitudes (Hardt and Negri 2005).

13 Obviously, this claim is being formulated once again from a familiar,
 14 disembodied Western vantage point, neglecting the growing asymmetries
 15 and hiding appropriation behind the concept of the Marxist commons. Ac-
 16 centuating creolization,² simplified and intensified contacts, migrations
 17 and journeys, and subtiles and translations as the landmarks of the new
 18 universal altermodern culture from which all artists, as Bourriaud claims,
 19 draw their techniques and devices, he once again appropriates concepts
 20 coming from non-Western theoretical paradigms, ignoring specific local
 21 contexts and histories of their emergence. Instead of Maffesoli's neo-
 22 tribalism and re-enchantment with the magic and irrational, Bourriaud of-
 23 fers a too banal fascination with Internet and computer technologies and
 24 computer metaphors such as "user-friendliness"; "do-it-yourself interactiv-
 25 ity" and the artist as engineer, programmer, or DJ, oversimplifying both
 26 contemporary reality and art (Bourriaud 2002a, 2009).

27 But let us delink from Maffesoli's understanding of aesthesis and rely
 28 on the decolonial interpretation of this category. With the emergence of
 29 explicit aesthetics in secular modernity, aesthesis was globally subsumed.
 30 It was a part of the wider process of colonization of being, knowledge,
 31 and perception that tagged the European past as premodern (traditional) and
 32 the non-European past and present as nonmodern and therefore nonhu-
 33 man. This has led to strict formulations of what is beautiful and sublime,
 34 good and evil, and to the emergence of particular canonical structures and
 35 artistic genealogies.

36 Certainly the Western genealogy of thought revolted against such nor-
 37 mative aesthetics long before Maffesoli. As a matter of fact, the philosophi-
 38 cal revolt against ratio-centrism initiated by the end of the nineteenth

century questioned the notorious “knowing subject,” in Wilhelm Dilthey’s formulation, and envisioned a being that not only thinks but also wills and feels (Dilthey 1991, 50). In many ways, Maffesoli follows in this path. Maffesoli’s decolonial interpretations of aesthesis share a problematizing of rationality and prescriptive aesthetic normativity, along with a focus on the collective experience as opposed to individual experience. Yet they do this from different geopolitical and corpo-political positions and trajectories of knowledge, perception, and being.

Decolonial aesthesis originates in the affective experience of those who have never been given a voice before and who also often have been (mis) represented and appropriated by Maffesoli’s new tribalists in the purely decorative form of noble savages and native informants, Calibans and Ariels. Such non-Western subjects are more sensitive to the corporeal dimensions of knowledge, perception, creativity, sexuality, and gender. In their experience, constructed bodily difference is constantly put forward, essentialized, and problematized, whereas they are seen or made invisible exclusively through their bodily difference.

Positioned at the intersection of ontology and epistemology, aesthesis acts as a mechanism to produce and regulate sensations; hence, it is inevitably linked with the body as an instrument of perception that mediates our cognition. Our bodies adapt to spaces through local histories—collective and personal. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981, 23) famously called this a “theory in the flesh,” stressing the importance of the “physical realities of our lives,” which “fuse to create a politics born out of necessity.” Setting aesthesis free lets us delink from the dominant politics of knowledge, being, and perception, which is grounded in suppression of the geo-historical dimensions of affects and corporalities. Decolonial aesthesis grows out of the geopolitical and corpo-political position of the “outside created from the inside” (Dussel 1985), liberating us from often unconscious but persistent total control over sensations to which our bodies react, in Walter Mignolo’s (2011) formulation. To do this, it is necessary to decolonize the knowledge that regulates aesthesis and the subjectivities that are controlled by Western modern/postmodern/altermodern aesthetics. Only then will it become possible to make a paradigmatic shift from often negative and destructive resistance to creative and life-asserting “re-existence,” in Adolfo Albán Achinte’s words (2006).

Albán Achinte explains that when a human being exists in the core of the colonial matrix as an other with no rights, for such a person an inclusion

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1 and an active reworking of odors, tastes, colors, and sounds of his or her
2 ancestors and the remaking of systematically negated forms of interactions
3 with the world—of being and perception—become a necessity, a sensual
4 response of resistance and of building of one’s own existence anew in defi-
5 ance of coloniality (Albán Achinte 2009). Re-existence then becomes an
6 effective decolonial strategy. (re-)creating the positive life models, sensa-
7 tions, and worlds that help to overcome the injustice and imperfection of
8 the present world. Re-existence is far from a primordialist call to return to
9 some essentialized and constructed authenticity. On the contrary, it is
10 a way to relive the main elements of erased and distorted indigenous (or
11 any other discarded) value systems while necessarily taking into account
12 the temporal lag and experiences of struggle and opposition, compromises
13 and losses, that have taken place. In other words, re-existence is not mere
14 repetition; it is variation in which there is not only always a stable core but
15 also a necessary creative element of difference, and hence of dynamics and
16 change. What is at work here is a development of the native tradition in
17 dialogue and in a constant argument with modernity. It is a complication
18 and an enrichment of our perspective, a constant balancing on the verge—
19 neither here nor there or simultaneously here, there, and elsewhere. De-
20 colonial aesthesis lets our sensations, and consequently the assumptions
21 we form on their basis, move forward and beyond the normative models of
22 truth, beauty, and goodness, whether they are Western or native.

23 As a species, we share the ability to use simultaneously two different
24 mechanisms of orientation and regulation of our behavior—the intellec-
25 tual and the affective—intersecting them in the aesthetic sphere. Human
26 mechanisms of perception may be universal, yet the manifestations of the
27 affects and modes of our perception are always locally, historically, and
28 culturally specific. Looking at the world from the “underside of modernity”
29 (Dussel 1996, 21), decolonial artists and thinkers reflect on how they in-
30 habit the colonial matrix of power, geographically and corpographically; how
31 they respond to it aesthetically; and how can they overcome the persis-
32 tent exoticization, appropriation, and condescending labeling (as “naive,”
33 “ethnic,” “primitivist,” “ornamentalist,” “stylized,” and so on) of their works
34 within the predictable Western frames. By doing this they enact a process
35 that is opposed to the naturalized (in Western modernity) delocalization
36 and disembodiment of thinking and feeling, which in fact has hidden the
37 provincialism of Western European aesthetic principles subsequently ren-
38 dered universal.

Decolonial aesthetics, on the contrary, draws attention to the geopolitical location of aesthetic colonization and evolves, through practices of emancipation of experience, corporality, and affectivity, from the creative mechanisms, norms, and limitations of artificially delocalized and disembodied (post-)(alter)modern aesthetics. The decolonial emancipation of aesthetics leads to a reinvention of the concept of art itself, reuniting its ontological, ethical, political, and epistemic potential through subversion, disidentification, tricksterism, resistance, and re-existence. This makes intricate forms of contemporary aesthetic colonization, such as boutique multiculturalism and commodified exoticism, visible as ways to appropriate and tame the other and to exclude those who refuse to comply.

Contemporary aesthetic theory is predominantly post-Marxist and largely universalist. It tends to erase geopolitical and corpo-political affective differences. Hence, it stumbles against the same age-old problem of either taking the non-Western other to sameness or fetishizing its difference. When the same logic is applied to art, this dilemma once again takes the form of assimilating to the mainstream norm or being relegated to the non-Western ghetto of ethnic arts and crafts. W. E. B. Du Bois and his followers struggled with the ontological question of what it means to be a (human) problem (Gordon 2007). In the aesthetic sphere, this question changes into, “What does it mean to be an artist if you are seen as a problem? What kind of art you are expected to produce, and what can you do to escape the Procrustean bed of such prescribed definitions that want you to be either a mere craftsman or an object of someone else’s art?”

One of the key categories of Western canonical aesthetics is the sublime, which plays a central role in the mechanism of catharsis. Immanuel Kant’s *The Critique of Judgment* (1951 [1790]) presents a classical theorizing of this process, which stresses such outcomes of successful subliminal experience as regaining one’s dignity; setting one’s mind and imagination free; and sending a person through a purgatory, which enables moral elevation and resistance to the forces of nature. In the case of the decolonial sublime, Kantian nature is replaced by modernity/coloniality and our belonging to it in various capacities—from objects to subjects, from critics to accomplices and those who delink from it. Global coloniality is then illuminated in an image or a metaphor, momentarily lighting up the trajectory of further epistemic, ethical, aesthetic, and existential solidarity in subversion.

The cathartic mechanism is grounded in demonstrating the darker side of modernity—that of violence, injustice, the dehumanization of the large

1 groups of people, the objectification of nature, and the delocalization of his-
2 torically and culturally bound experience. Decolonial sublime acts through
3 parody, irony, canonical counterdiscourse, deliberate and aestheticized
4 nostalgia, grotesque, chiasmus, overlay. This sublime is not based on fear,
5 as in the Kantian model, or pleasure linked with fear of the insignificant
6 human being in front of the greatness of nature. Consequently, Kantian
7 resistance to the forces of nature as an outcome of the sublime—and even
8 Bruce Robbins's (2002) model of the sweatshop sublime as a realization of
9 the global socioeconomic dimensions of being—are replaced with indig-
10 nation, repentance, hope, solidarity, and, most important, resolutions to
11 change the world to restore human dignity and the right to be oneself. The
12 decolonial sublime dynamically combines the rational and the emotional
13 in its constant multispatial hermeneutical effort (Tlostanova and Mignolo
14 2009), which requires active understanding instead of passive perception.

15 The decolonial sublime de-automatizes our perception to push us in the
16 direction of agency—ethical, political, social, creative, epistemic, and exis-
17 tential. This leads to serious shifts in how we interpret the world and relate
18 to other people. The decolonial sublime is grounded in overcoming in an
19 existential or Zen Buddhist sense, in transcending in the Kantian sense,
20 or, better yet, in transmodern delinking,³ after which the artist and the audi-
21 ence need to relink with something or someone. Here, the negative resis-
22 tance gives way to a positive re-existence. As essentially border thinkers
23 and dwellers, decolonial artists delink from and relink with various West-
24 ern and non-Western models, whereas the temporal dimension of such art
25 negates any progressive unidirectionality and opts for the simultaneity of
26 many times and spaces instead.

CHAPTER TWO

Decolonial Aesthetics and Post-Soviet Art

The post-Soviet subject is no doubt a theoretical construct whose validity is always threatened by its extreme heterogeneity. Yet there are certain social, political, cultural, and aesthetic factors that not only bind us all together, even after twenty-five years of the post-Soviet experience, but also make us occupy a particular nonspace in contemporary global coloniality and often trigger decolonial aesthetic drives among post-Soviet artists and thinkers. The affective sphere remains one of the very few areas left for the construction of a positive identity. The specificity of decolonial drives in the post-Soviet space is connected with their local histories and configurations of imperial difference. As a result, those locales that claim a (secondary and precarious) European belonging, at first demonstrate a catching-up complex and a longing to finally assimilate and become one with the old Europe (Kalnačs 2016a, 2016b). Later, many of them become disillusioned and turn to discursive and representational self-postcolonization and self-subalternization that, in its turn in some cases, develops into a decolonial sensibility (Jirgens 2006; Kovačević 2008).

1 In clearly non-European locales such as Central Asia and the Cauca-
2 sus, decolonial drives are coded through postcolonial symbolism that
3 is still marked by a difference between the Second World and the Third
4 World. In a neoimperial space of Russia the appropriation of decolonial
5 discourse takes its most dangerous form today: it is an imperial Soviet
6 self-affirmation at the expense of blackening the stronger imperial rivals
7 and racially stigmatizing the entire former colonial others—its own and
8 someone else's. In the center of this configuration stands an ethnic Rus-
9 sian who practices white supremacy in front of any non-Europeans, and
10 resents being rejected by the Western society which does not see him as
11 part of its racial sameness. It is not surprising that Russian propaga-
12 nda has offered one of the most malevolent and reactionary interpretations of the
13 European refugee crisis (Shimov 2016). The recurrent argument was that
14 Europe should let in and venerate the civilized white Christian migrants
15 (i.e., racialized post-Soviet groups) instead of the “Muslim savages.” Often
16 this discourse interlocks with National Bolshevism and its aftermath or
17 balances on the verge of openly fascist, ultra-right ideology.¹ The projection
18 of decolonial arguments onto the racially same poor and disenfranchised
19 others in contemporary Russia often takes the form of juxtaposing the pro-
20 vincial regions as colonized territories with Moscow as the evil metropolis
21 sucking the blood out of its own citizens. The darker side of this appro-
22 priation of the decolonial discourse is xenophobia and chauvinism. It is
23 yet another erasing of the problems of real (post)colonial others. This is a
24 dangerous development for decolonial option: the very ease with which
25 the most radical reactionary forces appropriate its ideas—from National
26 Bolshevism (which today quickly turns into a glamorous form of fascism) to
27 Alexander Dugin's neo-Eurasianist imperialism²—leaves a door open for the
28 most negative scenarios that, unfortunately, can easily come true in Russia.
29 The decolonial option can be used and abused by such problematic forces
30 as easily as it is appropriated by grassroots initiatives and social movements.
31 One of the interesting examples of such a creative yet problematic appro-
32 priation of decolonial discourse in contemporary Russia, which at times can
33 slide into National Bolshevik discourse, is the Bombily Art Group, repre-
34 sented by Anton Nikolayev and Alexander Rossihin (Nikolayev 2011).

Bombily and the Decolonial Option

The strange name of the group evokes the image of the bombers in a literal sense. Yet it can also be translated into English as “cabbies” meaning illegal cab drivers with no license. This name is connected with one of the occupations of its members that not only brought them additional means of survival but, more important, allowed them to meet and speak with various passengers and discuss the social and political problems of contemporary Russia during the ride. This group’s style, aptly called “Moscow Infantilism” (Parshikov 2008), is pointedly opposed to any conceptual and purely intellectual art that tends to be far from reality and the common people in the street. In most of its actions, the Bombily Art Group attempts to find ways back to the common people and elaborates a specific language that appeals to emotions rather than to the intellect. This is their way of decolonizing aesthetics.

One of Bombily’s most interesting actions took place in May 2007, in collaboration with members of the internationally better-known group *Voyna (War)* (Epshtein 2012). It was called “White Line,” and consisted in the symbolic cleaning of Russia by expelling the evil forces that have planted themselves in the city center and, according to the group’s blog, “drawing the line between the righteous and unrighteous.”³ In spite of Bombily’s infantile presentation the roots of this performance clearly went back to Nikolai Gogol’s macabre novelette *Viy* (1835), in which the main character was fighting with the devil and his accomplices by drawing a white line around himself and reciting a Christian prayer. In Bombily’s modern performance, the participants drew a white chalk line around the Moscow Garden Ring which traditionally divides the center of the city from its more democratic outskirts. Thus the activists encircled the evil zone and erected an invisible magical wall around it that went uninterrupted, despite highways, bridges, and underground paths.

Later Bombily projects included several car trips to provincial Russian towns, documented in road movies that attempt to reflect the differences between “Planet Moscow” and its many satellites living in different times and with different expectations for the future. Once again, the driving force was to try to break through and find a way of surviving for the ordinary human being in the outskirts of the former empire with no glamorous metropolitan symbols around and often with a clear realization of the doomed future. Several years ago, Anton Nikolayev, an art theorist, musician, activist,

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1 and member of the Bombily Art Group, became interested in the decolonial
2 option. The imperial difference that Nikolayev obviously represents selects
3 for itself certain parts of decolonial discourse that can be problematic,
4 because it shows the possible darker side of the decolonial option when and
5 if it is reinterpreted through the imperial difference. It then slides toward
6 National Bolshevism, with its peculiar imperial revivalism grounded not in
7 the idea of race or religion but rather some cultural, linguistic and broadly
8 leftist egalitarian community that is initially color-blind as it is interested
9 in coopting as many different people as possible into its ranks. But eventu-
10 ally this discourse can evolve into radical nationalism and fascism. It was
11 not by chance that Nikolayev publicly joined Limonov's National Bolshevik
12 Party after it was banned in Russia. In this gesture there was as much politics
13 as actionist protest aesthetics.

14 In a recent conversation with Nikolayev, I told him that I was very sur-
15 prised by his ardent interest in the decolonial option because I more often
16 find like-minded people among racialized and colonized groups or artists.
17 I wanted to understand what initially attracted him to decoloniality and
18 what elements of decolonial thought he found relevant. Nikolayev pointed
19 out that, in his view, post-Soviet Russia resembles a number of Latin Amer-
20 ican countries that over the past few decades have shaped their own, spe-
21 cific political discourse. He admitted that certain features of decolonial
22 thinking such as theology of liberation or decolonization might seem to
23 be exotic. Yet it occurred to him that something similar could emerge in
24 Russia by analogy. The most attractive feature of decolonial discourse for
25 Nikolayev is its optional nature (Mignolo, Escobar 2009), the fact that it
26 does not require a strict adherence and does not attempt to replace all pre-
27 vious and existing discourses, but offers an alternative (option) that one
28 can freely choose:

29 The optional discourse of decolonization sounds like something
30 that the minorities should speak, the autonomous regions and the
31 home-rule local communities. In other words, I became interested
32 in decoloniality in a political-technological way. I see it as a possible
33 theoretical basis for a social technology that would be accessible
34 and tactically convenient for the most microscopic agents of civil so-
35 ciety. This is the most important element of decolonial discourse that
36 I found not only interesting but also practically useful in its optional-
37 ity. Also, as an artist and a critic I was interested in the concept of
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aesthetics, which works well for the description of process-based and network art.⁴

To me it seems that there are certain aspects of Nikolayev's works which can indeed be interpreted in a decolonial way. Mainly it refers to the radical artistic reflection and actionism linked to the dichotomy of the city and the province and the embodiment of certain centrifugal tendencies that are becoming quite palpable today. For instance, he has made a series of road movies in many Russian provincial towns and has contributed a lot to the development of artist-in-residence programs at the Guslitsa art center outside Moscow.⁵ It is therefore tempting to compare the boundary between Moscow and provincial Russia to the divide between metropolis and colony and hence label this as some kind of internal colonization.

Nikolayev reacted to this idea through criticizing the federalist political model. He opposed it to the strong local self-rule lamenting that, according to the Russian Constitution, local governments are not part of the official organs of power and are in fact, exiled to the civil sphere which is closer to the society than any public policy. The activist stated: "Decolonization seems to me precisely an attempt at bridging the people and the local government. "At the same time, starting from the hypothesis that local governments in Russia could develop thanks, among other things, to independent network structures, it turns out, quite unexpectedly, that federalism is a serious rival to any local self-rule that has not yet elaborated its own language. In other words, there could be a competition between federalism and decolonization, and this is quite possible in the political-technological sense."⁶

In contrast with other theorists' views on the fundamentalist backlash, for Nikolayev the present-day Russian duality and division is structured around the ruthless competition of the two projects—the inertial progressive Soviet one and the post-Pinochet rightist project, neither of which has yet been properly conceptualized. He believes that the Latin American experience of both options, which have already played out in many different ways and more than once, could provide valuable lessons for Russia as well, and particularly in the NGO sector and volunteer organizations, which are largely lacking the necessary conceptual instruments for their motivation.

I was also interested to learn if and how Nikolayev links the decolonial discourse with his own activism and more widely with the radical activist art in Russia. It was crucial to understand how such radical activist art envisions

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1 its own future in an increasingly repressive society and how it assesses its
2 chances to affect this society in any significant way. This is particularly
3 important in Russia's changing political situation, when the artists are torn
4 between state censorship and the necessity to become a commodity.

5 In this department Nikolayev's response demonstrated a much more
6 mainstream artist's and critic's position than I expected. He pointed out
7 the paradox of activism: the more actions we take, the less art those actions
8 can contain. He also linked art as such with the concept of newness and the
9 "increment of knowledge," which betrays persistent and unconscious links
10 to modernity. Nikolayev is aware of the traps of activism such as becoming
11 unfocused; losing aesthetic significance as it becomes a mere functional
12 element of politics. Yet he is optimistic in his view of the actionist future:

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14 Actionism and other quasi-theatrical genres share a wonderful qual-
15 ity: they are able to resurrect themselves approximately every ten
16 years. Societies can seriously change their highlights in such a time
17 span, and it makes sense again to stage the provoking events, and
18 receive a different specter of reactions. However, when the restricted
19 tools of actionism are quickly played out, actionism, somehow, leaves
20 the zone of art and becomes something strictly applied and escap-
21 ing any positive aesthetic criteria. Representation remains a difficult
22 theoretical problem for contemporary art. There is hope that the tem-
23 poral extension of art, and the shift from object to process and to net-
24 working, allow an escape from conservative representational frames
25 and alleviate the repressive impact of the system. But it is not yet
26 clear how true and how important this is.⁷

27 While speaking with Nikolayev I also had a feeling that due to his much
28 younger than most of my other respondents, he did not remember the Soviet
29 Socialist context other than through his understandably idealizing child-
30 hood experience. There was an obvious generation gap between those who
31 suffered from repression and censorship and those who nurtured various
32 forms of Soviet nostalgia. His reaction to my question on his attitude toward
33 Soviet and post-Soviet sensibilities, he said, confirming my suspicion,

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35 I believe that the Soviet project was better than all others because I
36 feel close to it and we can all be reflected in it as in a mirror. I am at-
37 tracted by the progressivist part of the Soviet project; by its promise
38 of the revolutionary renewal of the world. Also the Soviet attitude

toward science and education was good. Moreover, the Soviet system is attractive because of its ideology of the social state and its efforts to reach everyone. There are a lot of negative sides, as well. The USSR is our mirror and our matrix, which we are bound to continue reflecting on for centuries. The question is not whether we should discard or keep the Soviet legacy—it is impossible to discard one’s own history, after all—but how we will finally reassemble it all. That is why local self-government and its connections with decolonization seem important for this matrix recomposition to be maximally profound.⁸

Multiplying Differences, or The Colonial Difference of the Imperial Difference

In this section, I analyze tendencies toward decolonialization in post-Soviet art by concentrating exclusively on those groups and people who share the postcolonial and post-Soviet predicament and who were, and are, “others” in the modern/colonial designs—Czarist, Soviet, national(ist) post-Soviet, and neoliberal global.

Postcolonial post-Soviet subjects experience a specific form of double-consciousness. In the USSR it was connected with a division between Soviet and national cultures, which sometimes merged in boutique multiculturalist forms, such as when official aesthetics prescribed how a national/ethnic author or artist should write or paint. Today the situation is even more paradoxical. There is a new official and safe norm adapted for the national art as opposed to unofficial critical art. The latter may be national in its spirit, but in its own dynamic forms, which are often far from any frozen and completely constructed authenticity. This is threatening to the post-Soviet nation-states, but also sells well in the West. As a result any serious and critical artist-activists (artivists) ends up in yet another dead end, between the devil of the state and the deep blue sea of the market.

Post-Soviet postcolonial artists then experiences an unpleasant déjà vu that, in some cases may lead to a development of decolonial sensibility. In the Soviet system artists had an uneasy choice between the Eurocentric academic education and their consent to play the role of craftsmen, reproducing the presumably age-old traditions in a restricted area of the so-called national/ethnic arts. In colleges and universities, the national departments of art, language and literature, dance, and music were always considered nonprestigious and therefore were easier to enroll. On the surface, this

1 looked like a celebration of Soviet affirmative action, but in reality this
2 structure strangled any real development of national/ethnic cultures in the
3 colonies except in the Soviet package of the national in its form and social-
4 ist in its essence.

5 The students of these national departments were not taught any theo-
6 retical disciplines, and even the obligatory survey courses in the history of
7 art, literature, or music, in their case were considerably shortened and sim-
8 plified. From the very start then a hierarchy was established, within which
9 it was taken for granted that artists do not need to know Renoir if they are
10 going to paint *pahta* (cotton flower) ornaments on *piyālas* (traditional cen-
11 tral Asian cups in the form of small bowls mostly used for serving tea) for the
12 rest of their lives; musicians do not need to know Mozart if they are going
13 to play *zurna* (traditional woodwind instrument similar to oboe, known in
14 many countries of Central Eurasia) for the next fifty years; and poets do not
15 need to know Shakespeare if they are going to recycle traditional oral poetic
16 forms imbuing them with Socialist contents (e.g., by eulogizing collective
17 farms and Lenin instead of national heroes and warriors). One can naively
18 interpret this positively and say that if Mozart and Shakespeare symbolize
19 Eurocentric values, then the indigenous people and the colonized groups
20 may have been better off in Soviet academic institutions, since they were
21 not asked or offered to study the Western tradition. Yet this was also a cun-
22 ning form of coloniality, whereas the real way out should have been letting
23 the young artists study both models, without constructing hierarchies.

24 At the same time, the interpretation of ethnic-national culture in this
25 case was reduced to a set of simple devices that presumably could be ap-
26 plied to any content, including the ideologically Soviet one. Thus the study
27 of native culture, art, or cosmology was limited to training the future artists
28 how to use these devices, whereas the axiological grounds behind indig-
29 enous art were wiped off or made invisible. Luckily, this Soviet requirement
30 was not followed too strictly and the colonies still had many masters, who
31 continued to teach their pupils how to be in the world, and not just how to
32 paint a pretty cotton flower on tea bowls. Certainly the restored and main-
33 tained accent on cosmological links between art and knowledge, art and
34 the existential sphere, and art and contemporary life, instead of a purely
35 instrumental understanding of art as a frozen repetitive device, had to be
36 hidden to avoid Soviet repression. And it took many efforts by both the
37 masters and their pupils to reconnect the native cosmology as a living en-
38 tity and their everyday lives, in which any ethnic culture was always effec-

tively limited to be represented just as a decoration (Abbasov 2005).⁹ The artists could practice resistance only mentally or in indirect ways because any art that stepped outside the Soviet multiculturalist model immediately landed its creators in prison as bourgeois nationalists.

If one chose classical academic education in the art and the humanities, one had to reject all native ethnic-national elements and become homogeneously Soviet (that is Western and Russian in terms of aesthetics, and Socialist in terms of ideology). Yet since these artists were still not Russian (or Western) by origin, they had to know their place and be forever confined to a secondary status—for instance, to be good imitators of the “great” Russian/Soviet Socialist realists. There was no possibility for combining the consciously selected Western techniques and some national-ethnic aesthetic identifications. This was a weird Soviet/colonial form of doubleconsciousness. One could expect that after the collapse of the Soviet system the ethnic-national art, music, and literature finally had a chance to develop their own forms rather than continue to be imitations of the Western or Russian originals or prescribed multiculturalist oeuvres. However the long awaited renaissance of indigenous art never really happened. The national continued to exist in its decorative forms. They just got rid of the collective farms and Lenin and replaced these recurrent images with artificially invented ancient traditions that were convenient for the new old elites. In the end there was another void. Any links with ethnic-national art forms, cosmologies and axiologies were irreparably destroyed. And this was one of the most appalling successes of the Soviet époque.

And yet there are still artists who manage to critically and dynamically engage with their national-ethnic elements, and Western and Russian canons, as well as with different subversive traditions within them. They try to remake and problematize all of these elements in their works. These impulses are decidedly decolonial, as the artists criticize both global modernity/coloniality and provincial local color from their border position. It is this kind of disobeying and delinking trickster artist that the repressive neocolonial and neoimperial post-Soviet regimes dread most. The return of repressive, and often fundamentalist, national and religious communities of sense today is often regarded as an echo of the Soviet époque; consequently, protests against this new-old repression often take the form of revisiting the dissident anti-Soviet past.

Post-Soviet artists coming from or connected with traditionally Muslim regions, often reconstruct and deconstruct the Islamic sides of their

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1 identities in decolonial ways fully understanding both the constraining nature of global modernity/coloniality, and the strangling power of any religious fundamentalism. These people do not simply go back to Islam after the decades of the forced secular Russian/Soviet modernity. Rather, they are looking at the Muslim symbols and signs through the critical lens of modernity/coloniality without taking sides, and constantly negotiating their creolized bordering forms of secular Western/Russian (post-Soviet) and native/Muslim sensibilities. In the 1990s, artists from the Caucasus and Central Asia, tired of the old socialist in essence and national/ethnic in form formula, turned to various neo-mythological forms of representation by means of recurrent leitmotifs and symbols such as dung, felt, trains, heroes, and the Silk Road (Gamzatova 2009). This can be seen as part of a wider phenomenon of ethnic renaissance that started in the Soviet Union in the 1970s–80s and contributed to its demise from within. The 2000s brought global and local social and political reality back into the art in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Many works attempted to re-create a dynamic, if contradictory, dialogue between cosmological roots and contemporary conditions, between local histories and global designs, in the destinies of those who belong to the underside of modernity. This art can be called “postethnic” in the sense that it strives to critically revisit and overcome many recurrent elements of the ethnic art of the 1990s, contemplating these elements through the prism of contemporary global and local social and political concerns.

Decolonial Art in Central Asia?

26 A telling example of decolonial art in Central Asia can be found in the openly repressive country of Uzbekistan, which combines some elements of Soviet-style discipline and punishment with post-Soviet, statist, ethnic clan lawlessness. Contemporary artists who criticize both Soviet and post-Soviet national forms of unfreedom, and are aware of the traps of neoliberal globalization, are vulnerable in this environment. Post-Soviet artists are exposed to the pressure of commercialization and commodification of their works and identities. But they are also not free from state-induced ideological censorship. This is the situation in which the Uzbek artist, philosopher, poet, and cinematographer Vyacheslav Akhunov now finds himself. Forbidden to leave Uzbekistan (which continues to use the Soviet system of exit visas, and his is repeatedly denied), he has had to limit himself to holding low-key “apartment exhibitions” in his home country while his works

travel the world. A number of important museums and private collectors have bought his art in the past two decades, and Akhunov has won several important prizes at biennials and festivals. But in most cases he is not even allowed to visit his own exhibition or collect the prize. This is the double existence per se, which makes Akhunov's life uncomfortable yet imbues him with an additional perspective. This would be impossible, had he been more integrated into the simulacrum of the local artistic world or had he simply been a Western artist belonging to the sphere of sameness.

Blind Alley (2007), one of Akhunov's most powerful video artworks, captures a peculiar post-Soviet despair that is echoed in works from several other post-socialist countries (e.g., in the Romanian artist Ciprian Mureșan's work *Leap into the Void, after Three Seconds* [2004]). Like many other examples of Akhunov's video art, *Blind Alley* was filmed in Tashkent's old city, where the artist resides. Several protagonists wander in the narrow, curved streets looking for a way out and always ending up in a blind alley as a pervading symbol of contemporary Uzbek life.

Akhunov plays on various myths, utilized by the new/old elites both in Russia and in Uzbekistan, placing them against the looming background of the global coloniality, intermeshing the imperial/colonial past and the neo-imperial/colonial present. Such is his series of collages based on counter-discursive interpretations of the nineteenth century Russian painter Vassily Vereschagin's militaristic Orientalist works. It includes *The Doors of the New Tamerlane* (2005), in which one of the guards from Vereshchagin's painting is replaced with a modern uniformed Uzbek security officer. Akhunov thus accentuates the immutability of a hierarchical power system that is hostile to its subalterns and the contemporary revival of the Timurid myth.

Another famous work by Vereshchagin that was reproduced in all Soviet history textbooks and is still proudly exhibited at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow is *The Apotheosis of War* (1871). With its stereotypical heap of human skulls, it is often interpreted as the artist's antimilitaristic statement. In Akhunov's version, the skulls are intact, but the surrounding desert is adorned with large advertisements for Coca-Cola and other staples of popular culture and signs of belonging to global modernity: a "peaceful" consumerist conquest still leaves human skulls behind while the present military leaders and dictators can be successful capitalists, building their fortunes at the expense of the former owners of these skulls.

The last painting in this series, *Return of the Forgotten Regiment*, reflects on the Russian/Soviet empire's relation to its former soldiers, and generally

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1 to all citizens. It originates from Vereshchagin's *At the Fortress Walls: Let*
 2 *Them Enter!* (1871), a painting that celebrates the Russian Army's "coura-
 3 geous attack" on Samarkand, in which Vereshchagin himself took an active
 4 part. Akhunov makes an almost imperceptible but powerful replacement:
 5 instead of the ruined Samarkand fortress wall, the regiment assaults a
 6 crumbling Kremlin wall that turns out to be made of clay. Symbolically, the
 7 forgotten regiment is paying back to the empire and taking revenge against
 8 those in power who sacrificed the soldiers' lives and then chose to abandon
 9 the former loyal servants to perish in the ruins of empire.

10 *What Does It Mean to Be "Kazakhian"?*

11 Previously nomadic Kazakhstan, which was flooded with millions of Slavic
 12 colonists in the Soviet years who successfully diluted the local population
 13 and made today's Kazakhstani idea of nation a highly constructed one, is
 14 an interesting case of emerging decolonial sensibilities. Some of them take
 15 deliberately actionist forms, when artists exploit their over-exaggerated
 16 Asiatic features, making fun of demonizing Orientalist ideologies, still
 17 widely spread both in the West, in Russia, and in Central Asia itself. Thus,
 18 Said Atabekov has worked on peculiar assemblages that fused and superim-
 19 posed presumably "traditional" and eternal ethnic-national features with
 20 bits and pieces of contemporary reality—often disturbing, threatening,
 21 and violent. However, these intrusions of modernity/coloniality into his
 22 characters' lives are invariably made nonaggressive, softened and domesti-
 23 cated to show that life goes on and easily swallows and reworks any alien
 24 elements, incorporating them into its system. In fact, it is the opposite of
 25 the usual assimilation and appropriation of colonial others through which
 26 the artist draws the attention to what was marginalized before.

27 Atabekov's decolonial counter-discourse can be exemplified by his most
 28 well-known and controversial work, *The Son of the East* (1995). He discovers
 29 an unexpected complex visual symbolism in *shanyrak*—a wooden ring
 30 with a cross inside, used to hold together the frame of the yurt (traditional
 31 Kazakh movable tent-house¹⁰ By placing the naked figure of a teenage boy
 32 on the cross, Atabekov combines the post-dependence national symbol of
 33 Kazakhstan with the Christian imagery of crucifixion. At another impor-
 34 tant layer of visual symbolism, the image of the teenage boy mocks the
 35 ideal proportions of Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian man. In both contexts,
 36 the humanity of the protagonist is negated as he is made into an empty
 37 symbol of national or universalist humanist ideology.
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FIG. 2.1 Taus Makhacheva, *Super Taus* (Untitled 1). Dagestan, 2014. Viral video, 2.16, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist.

In Atabekov's *Warrior's Cradle* (2007) and *Holy Family* (2001), the handle of the cradle is a Kalashnikov gun; instead of a canopy the family recycles an abandoned banner of the United Nations troops, while a group of Kazakh women in traditional clothes drags a faulty UN car through the steppe, using just a rope. This work somewhat rhymes with the Dagestani artist Taus Makhacheva's video artwork *Super Taus* (2014). Dressed in a traditional Avarian dress and headscarf, she is travelling in an old car along the unpaved mountain road, which is suddenly blocked by a huge stone. Three male workmen are unable to remove it to facilitate the traffic. The artist easily and nonchalantly does their job by herself, as many of her women relatives would actually do in their everyday lives. Such is her cunning play on the folkloric and mass cultural superheroes, merging with ordinary people from contemporary reality (Makhacheva 2015).

The Kazakh artist Yerbossyn Meldibekov's works combine postcolonial and post-socialist imagery and aesthetics, struggling to come to terms simultaneously with Western and global tendencies. Playing on his own demonized identity, Meldibekov revisits his Central Asian roots to transform himself into an Asian analogue of the paradigmatic barbarian. He becomes an Oriental other who has fallen out of time. His works are irreducible to the Western (and Russian/Soviet) canon, and to the so-called ethnic-national and ethnographic art. They are based on a creative, ironic and subversive reworking of all of these elements instead.

1 A number of Meldibekov's video-documented performances are uni-
2 fied by the dystopian space of Pastan as a generalized image of demon-
3 ized Central Asia, that is perceived as having fallen out of time. In the
4 name "Pastan" one hears echoes of the existing "Stans"—Uzbekistan, Af-
5 ghanistan, Kazakhstan—but grotesquely exaggerated by Meldibekov's pro-
6 vocative and ironic stance, which rejects the prettifying tradition in the
7 interpretation of ethnic culture and opts instead for a bloodthirsty and
8 demonstrative type of exoticism. Many viewers in Russia and the West
9 take this exoticism at face value, which allows them to rest peacefully with
10 their reconfirmed Orientalist stereotypes, whereas Kazakh intellectuals
11 often react indignantly, accusing the artist of unpatriotic gestures. Both
12 groups remain blind to a significant gap between the artist's self and his
13 often violent and bitter allegories of mute and dehumanized Central Asian
14 subjectivity, devoid of any dignity or desire for freedom. Hence, the char-
15 acters of Meldibekov's series are sold in the market like cabbage in sacks;
16 live human heads stick out of piles of bricks or directly from the earth and
17 are left to die slowly in the sun. Although Meldibekov defines "Pastan" as
18 a message created out of disappointment with Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's re-
19 forms, its meaning is clearly more complex than the author's original inten-
20 tion (Fomenko 2013), as it embraces the leitmotif of essential powerlessness
21 and dispensability of human lives, which overgrows the Central Asian local
22 context in the direction of global social reality, where colonialism is being
23 reborn as coloniality.

24 Meldibekov's *Gattamelata in the Hide of Genghis Khan* (2006) is based in
25 a double critique of the Western canon and its neocolonial Central Asian
26 incarnations, sharing the universal cult of militant authority and power.
27 The artist criticizes both the pervasive self-Orientalization and derivative
28 post-Soviet Eurocentrism of local Kazakh elites and superfluous and banal
29 interpretations of national/ethnic culture. He accentuates the absence, the
30 hiatus, and, ultimately, the unimportance of the military leader's actual
31 identity—whether that leader is Gattamelata, Genghis Khan, or Tamerlane.
32 This is expressed in Meldibekov's taxidermic tendencies. In *Gattamelata in*
33 *the Hide of Genghis Khan*, as in many other works, he uses the preserved
34 parts of dead animals' bodies—this time, a horse's legs with naturalistic
35 physiological details of bones and veins. These legs also symbolize power
36 and violence. The original "Gattamelata," from which Meldibekov cop-
37 ied his postcolonial caricature, was a statue of the condottiere Erasmo
38 da Narni. It was erected in Padua, where Donatello immortalized him in

the first Renaissance equestrian monument. This model was to be replicated in all the equestrian monuments thereafter—both in Europe and today in Central Asia as well. The capitals of Central Asian states have also acquired such monuments in the last twenty-five years. The “heroes” they depict are often obscure, or even completely invented, historical personages brought back from oblivion. They carry no real significance for contemporary citizens of these nations. These nomads lack faces—or, rather, they are equipped with average Mongoloid features, resembling everyone and no one at the same time.

A similar misunderstanding on the part of Eurocentric critics takes place in the case of the Buryat artist Zorikto Dorzhiev, a cunning trickster who makes fun of unsuspecting audiences’ assumptions that a savage from the Far Eastern steppe can make only simple objects with little aesthetic value. This artist regards the nomadic world of his contemplating characters not as much as a real physical material place, but as an infinite and flexible existential and metaphysical space, combining the personal and the cosmic. This decolonial Buddhist with a solid formal academic art education, which he soon rejected for being too Eurocentric, offers a virtuoso canonical counter-discourse of the most famous Western artworks, leaving no stone untouched in the department of classical aesthetics. Such is his *Gioconda Khatun* (2007), in which the standard of European beauty transmutes into a Buryat woman. Yet, a Caliban, painting an ironic Miranda’s portrait to make her look like his mother Sycorax, can never be accepted into Prospero’s reference system. A similar technique of repainting Western masterpieces, making their characters look decidedly Mongoloid and supplying them with Kazakh-sounding names, is used by Kuanysh Bazargaliev in his project *When Everyone Was Kazakhian* (2013).

The Kazakh woman artist Saule Suleimenova superimposes archival and contemporary photographs and painting in her multi-temporal and multi-spatial series *I Am Kazakh*. She carefully releases the forgotten and suppressed impulses and sensations of the beautiful, attempting to “reconnect and reconcile traditional Kazakh culture and the aesthetics of revolt, modernist artistic devices, the pathos of eternity, and the poetics of the everyday.”¹¹ Suleimenova keeps coming back to persistent inferiority complexes, which are typical in contemporary Kazakhstan, where thinking and perception are still marked by coloniality: “Our people desperately want to look better. They are very much afraid that someone will think badly of them.”¹² Suleimenova urges her compatriots to unlearn others’ artificial ideas of the beautiful and sublime—Western and local—that were taught to

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FIG. 2.2 Saule Suleimenova, *Cow Apa*. 2016. Acrylic in giclée print on canvas, 127 cm × 180 cm. From the series *AstanaLine*. Courtesy of the artist.

them as universal and natural. She is thus attempting to decolonize their idea of Kazakhness. Similarly to Meldibekov, Suleimenova was initially accused of taking an unpatriotic stance and disgracing the image of Kazakhstan in her works, which superimpose Kazakh faces from nineteenth-century photographs on the contemporary ragged walls of Almaty and rundown garages inscribed with endless advertisements. But this decolonial inoculation, shocking at first, is already producing results as more and more Kazakhs turn to Suleimenova's works as powerful aids for unconventional self-reflection and critical thinking at the crossroads of rationality and affect.

In *I am Kazakh* and in her recent series *Cellophane Painting*, where Suleimenova turns garbage (the used plastic bags) into art, she recreates a more complex and contradictory idea of reality than any official binary ideology is able to offer. She says, that contemporary Kazakh reality is “awful and beautiful at once” (2010) and people must learn how to deal with it and how to appreciate this complexity, this symphonic nature of life. Art in its turn should not take this reality to flat and frozen images and stereotypes, to rosy prettiness or stylized archaism. In this respect *Cellophane Painting* is also a play on ethnic-national archetypes and stereotypes. The artist



FIG. 2.3 Saule Suleimenova, *Notarial Office*. 2015. Acrylic on giclée print on canvas, 127 cm × 180 cm. From the series *AstanaLine*. Courtesy of the artist.

links them to a more global ecological dimension and a reflection on colonial forms of consumer society and second-rate modernity. The “paintings” in question are in reality made of recycled plastic bags of different colors. They often depict the primordial Kazakh steppe, which the staunch patriots venerate so much, yet continue to pollute with these very plastic bags, left over from their happy consumer purchases, to the point that the blooming steppe becomes invisible under the plastic garbage cover. Suleimenova does not avoid the overtly political themes either. Thus in *Zhanaozen* (2014) she presented the tabooed story of the massacre in the oil town Zhanaozen, when fourteen people protesting against the regime, were killed by the police on the country’s Independence Day, and many were imprisoned (Ames 2011).

The Babylonian Caucasus and the Decolonial Aesthesis

Ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity in the Caucasus, as well as the region’s complex imperial-colonial histories, do not prevent it from keeping a pan-Caucasian community of sense and a shared decolonial subjectivity that is expressed in multiple forms in a number of works created by artists from the region. For instance, Azerbaijani authors problematize various

1 kinds of modernities imposed on their open and changeable identity, al-
 2 ways escaping any stiff prescribed forms. In his multilingual visual poetry,
 3 Babi Badalov mixes Latin and Cyrillic alphabets in an effort to make sense
 4 of his own diasporic queer existence in Europe. Orhan Guseynov's *Non-*
 5 *Standard* (2006) celebrates the fact that Azerbaijani culture refuses to fit
 6 into Western norms, even in such simple matters as sticking *chureks* (a
 7 kind of handmade cornbread) into an electric toaster. The Dagestani art-
 8 ist Magomed Dibirov's *SOUP* (2006) follows in this direction, showing the
 9 unhappy face of his niece as she refuses to eat a replica of Andy Warhol's
 10 mass-produced tomato soup.

11 Generally the Northern Caucasus artists are less openly decolonial as
 12 they still remain within the Russian Federation and must be more care-
 13 ful in their self-censorship and less open to any dialogues with European
 14 countries or much less with the Muslim world at large. Dibirov is a good
 15 example of such an Aesopian language. A native of Khasavyurt—a town at
 16 the border of Chechnya and Dagestan, the artist encrypts his political ideas
 17 in physically palpable material metaphors and often deliberately inanimate
 18 objects. Such a political still life is his *Member of the Federation*, where Russia
 19 is depicted as a brick wall in which one loose brick stands for Dagestan. An-
 20 other example is *Temporary Truce*, featuring a meat grinder as an obvious
 21 symbol of power and a lonely tomato whose destiny is way too clear. In *Se-*
 22 *curity Service*, Dibirov addresses Islamophobia through an expressive image
 23 of a beautiful arch, behind which lies the wonderful modern world and its
 24 guardian—a gigantic safety razor. The razor is awaiting the bearded Muslim
 25 protagonist (the beard here is a symbol of Muslim identity) as a necessary
 26 and inescapable condition of his integration into Western society.

27
 28 *“Super Taus” and Other Creatures*

29 Another interesting example of emerging decolonial sensibility and aes-
 30 thesis in the northern Caucasus can be found in Taus Makhacheva's per-
 31 formances, installations, and video art. One of the most successful young
 32 post-Soviet artists of non-Russian ethnic-national origins, Makhacheva
 33 has skyrocketed to international fame. She cannot be taken to represent
 34 merely Dagestani identity, yet at the same time she does not fit the neo-
 35 universalist globalist model favored by international contemporary art
 36 gurus. Makhacheva grew up in Moscow, earned her master's degree in Lon-
 37 don, and now divides her time among Dagestan; Moscow; and art residen-
 38 cies in Europe, Asia, and America. Yet this trajectory does not make her an

altermodern artist à la Bourriaud. Her critical cosmopolitanism does not prevent her from maintaining strong links with the Caucasus. At the same time, she always keeps an ironic distance from this culture, to which she still partly feels she belongs. In this respect, Makhacheva often acts as a self-reflexive anthropologist-cum-artist, striving to better understand contemporary culture and the social and political reality of Dagestan, which is constantly torn between the modernizing and Westernizing tendencies, stylized Islamic models, pale remnants of the Soviet modernity, and persistent local indigenous traditions.

Even Makhacheva's earliest video works could be regarded as cases of decolonial aesthesis. For example, such was her performance *Carpet* (2006) in which she slowly wrapped and unwrapped herself into and out of a traditional carpet *kilim*, typical of Persia, the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus. Her video is not exoticizing the carpets or celebrating carpet making as a traditional craft. Rather, it is a document of her struggling to come to terms and stay in touch with her own culture. Makhacheva performs this task through an extremely corporeal sensation, rediscovering traces of communal memory of other Caucasus women's bodies, wrapped and unwrapped into carpets to be kidnapped into forced marriages or sold into slavery. But in Makhacheva's case, wrapping herself into a carpet becomes a decolonial gesture of bodily reunification with the forgotten native sounds, smells, surfaces, textures, and tastes. The video recreates an almost palpable sense of the old rough carpet on the human skin. The artist relives these personal and collective embodied memories, using an old carpet as a decolonial tool, which is far from being a detached object of decorative applied arts, but rather acts as an almost living subject.

In the next decade, Makhacheva created several decolonial projects, including *Delinking* (2011), which interprets this concept in a peculiar body-graphic way. The artist wanted to embody the idea of delinking "from European thinking and ways of receiving knowledge, because in all cultures there are completely different systems for [and] practices of transmitting knowledge, cultural and intellectual evolution. [But] the world uses only the sanctified Western academic system" (Makhacheva 2011). In *Delinking*, Makhacheva's face is painted with Indian, African, and Middle Eastern ornaments. This kind of henna body art is used in various rituals on hands and legs but never on the face. As soon as her whole face was covered with ornaments, the spaces where the skin was still visible were filled with more henna, so that in the end her visage was totally covered with green mass.

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1 After it got dry and was washed off, the face changed its color and became
2 orange-brownish. It stayed so for about a week as a new mask, a new mock-
3 ing identity, leaving a trace. The changing face color, thus became a space
4 for multi-spatial overlay of different cultural and epistemic systems.

5 Another decolonial gesture that emerges in several of Makhacheva's
6 works refers to her play with space and spatial histories, which are al-
7 ways connected with bodies and embodiment. In *Gamsutl* (2012), she con-
8 templates how human beings communicate with space, both natural and
9 man-made, and with social and historical dimensions of spatiality through
10 rediscovering and reliving in an utmost bodily sense, various forgotten and
11 discarded spaces. The ruins of the abandoned village Gamsutl merge with
12 the natural rocky landscape around. They imperceptibly blend with the
13 cliffs, as the natural guardians, finally claiming this space back from the
14 humans, who did not cope with making a livable and sustainable space
15 on the top of the mountain. The performance centers on a ritual of remem-
16 bering and reenactment of the spatial memory and embodied merging with
17 this multilayered space, which witnessed the Russo-Caucasus War, Soviet
18 modernity, and post-Soviet abandonment and return to nature. The protago-
19 nist of the video is a young man who is trying on various identities, imagines
20 himself as a defender of Gamsutl, an assaulter, a warrior and citizen, and a
21 brigade leader at a Soviet collective farm, merging traditional dance with
22 symbols of Soviet modernity. Finally, he is just a human who is striving to
23 understand what it means to be a tombstone, a watchtower, a crack in the
24 dilapidated wall.

25 The close connections between spaces and bodies stand in the center of
26 Makhacheva's attention in other works, as well. In *Landscape* (2013), she
27 plays on the fact that, in the Avarian language, the word for "mountains" and
28 "noses" is the same by presenting an installation of wooden copies of the real
29 noses of Caucasus inhabitants, who traditionally are known for their large
30 and prominent noses. She arranges the wooden copies in such a way that
31 the installation becomes a replica of the Caucasus mountain range, made of
32 the human noses, thus accentuating the bodily dimensions of the Avarian
33 identity and humorously, their close connections with the environment.

34 A more openly political and disturbing dimension enters Makhacheva's
35 experiments with space and corporeality in *Caspian Sea* (2014), first pre-
36 sented at the Uppsala Konstmuseum in Sweden. For the opening of the
37 Friction Festival for performance art, Makhacheva prepared a geograph-
38 ical cake in the form of the real landscape around the Caspian Sea. She

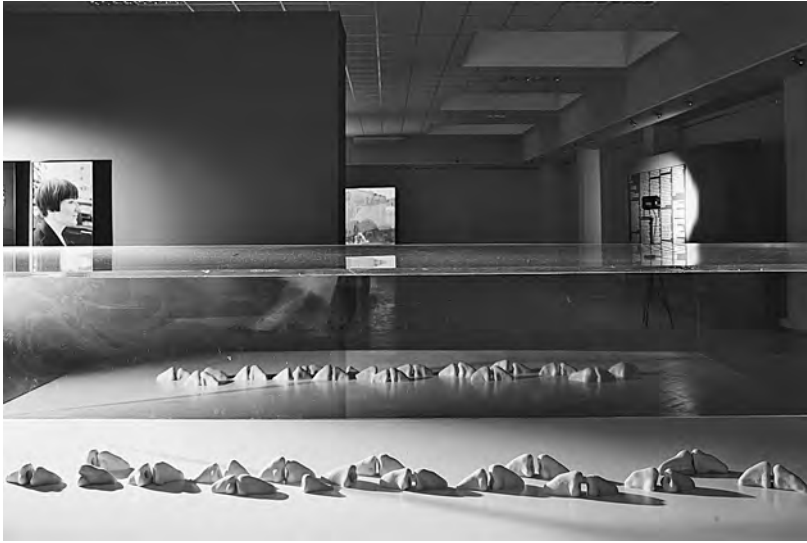


FIG. 2.4 Taus Makhacheva, *Landscape*. 2013–present. Series of objects, wood, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

was cutting the cake and distributing its pieces among the guests at the opening of the festival. The artist here literally embodied the metaphor of annexation as devouring and consuming countries and territories, which unfortunately is becoming a habitual practice once again. An obvious parallel to this gastronomic representation of aggressive geopolitics is the war in Ukraine. It is being distorted by propaganda of all the interested sides, which is also symbolically force-feeding the audiences with its indigestible dishes. An additional uneasy accent of this work is its historical parallelism. As in many other projects, Makhacheva first works with forgotten archival materials, which she studies at the State Documentary Archive in Krasno-gorsk. There she discovered a documentary chronicle—one of the favorite Soviet genres of World War 2 period, in which a cake in the shape of the Caspian region was presented to Adolf Hitler by his generals. The artist is skeptical about the authenticity of this chronicle, as there is not a single episode where Hitler and the cake would share the same frame. But even if this were a montage, it does not negate the obvious parallel between recent geopolitical events and World War II history.

The most wide-scale expression of decolonial drives in Makhacheva's works is presented in her projects focusing on the decolonization of

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FIG. 2.5 Taus Makhacheva, *Caspian Sea*. 2014. Photo documentation of the performance *Cake*. Courtesy of the artist.

museums. This trend is getting popularity all over the world, finding its realization in various museum interventions. They problematize the affective and conceptual operations, lying in the basis of the creation, appreciation and interaction with art and questioning the essentialist approaches, which were naturalized in the museum exhibitions before, through viewing “the established beliefs and institutions of our modern heritage as not only real but true, and not only true but good” (Curtis 2012, 74). These interventions are questioning the institutional framing of art and the linear progressivist narrative that museums continue to promote, thus problematizing the boundaries between representation and appropriation. As a result, a major epistemic and optical shift is enacted in a deliberate reversal of the roles of the audience and the objects it contemplates. Françoise Lionnet (2012, 192) cites the example of a Native American museum in which “exhibitions have been designed and controlled by those whose culture is on display. . . . Then the objects appear to be observing the spectators who become objectified by the masks whose eyes seem to be following their movements. In this case the exhibition builds a flexible, dynamic relationship with the culture it seeks to represent, and at the same time—with the viewer—neither of whom is entombed or simply reflected but put into a

problematic dialogue instead.” The exhibition “A Museum Looks at Itself;”	1
at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, New York in 1992, provided	2
another interesting example of a critical, self-reflexive approach problema-	3
tizing the imperialist and racist ideologies in the basis of this museum’s	4
principles of representation and selection.	5
Decolonial artists combine the roles of artists and curators by critically	6
engaging permanent collections, the spatial and temporal structures of ex-	7
isting museums, and the ways those museums stage their interaction with	8
the audiences. Often, decolonization of the museum takes the form of hid-	9
den or camouflaged interventions, grounded in deliberately accentuating of	10
the elements of “tradition” as seen through a certain critical perspective—for	11
instance, by presenting artifacts of a nonmodern culture alongside conceptual	12
video art or performances by contemporary authors who are connected with	13
that culture. Widely known examples of decolonial museum interventions	14
include Fred Wilson’s site-specific installations “Mining the Museum”	15
(Maryland Historical Society, 1993) and “The Museum: Mixed Metaphors”	16
(Seattle Art Museum, 1993). Wilson (1993: 101) is “interested in bringing	17
historical information to the aesthetic experience in order to reveal the	18
imperialist reality of how museums obtain or interpret the objects they	19
display. Doing so makes clear the complexity of things on display.”	20
Makhacheva has also contributed to the decolonization of the museum	21
in several of her recent projects. The disciplining role of the museum as an	22
imperial or national institution that provides a single, legitimized histori-	23
cal or aesthetic truth in a popular form is problematized in her small-scale	24
work <i>The Way of an Object</i> (2013), based on the collection of the Dages-	25
tan Museum of Fine Arts. In this work, the artist plays with a number of	26
museum objects, putting them in unfamiliar contexts outside the museum,	27
such as at the entrance to the State Puppet Theater, where this performance	28
first took place. This peculiar delocalizing, or “de-museumizing,” was done	29
to give voices back to objects that have been mute; to represent talking	30
museum objects acting as characters in a puppet theater play written spe-	31
cifically for this work. The characters are an Avarian salt box; a Kubachi	32
wedding bracelet; and the painting <i>The Bird Gamayun</i> (1895), by Victor Vas-	33
netsov. In their endless arguments, Makhacheva rethinks the idea of narrat-	34
ing multiple histories in relation to a museum exhibition.	35
Giving mute and muted objects the right, and ability, to speak again is	36
one of the more widespread approaches in the decolonization of museums.	37
Often the main focus shifts from the (material) collection to a narrative,	38

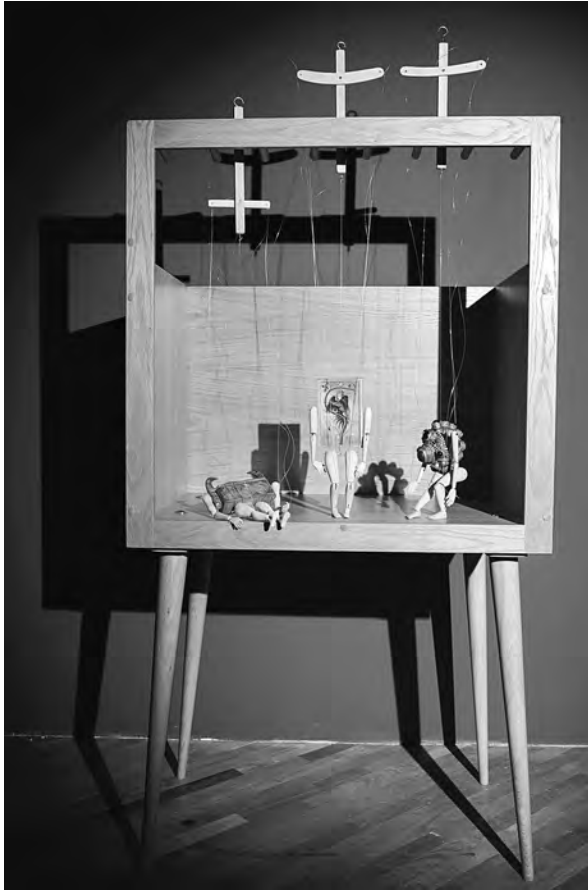


FIG. 2.6 Taus Makhacheva, *The Way of an Object*. 2013. Set of three marionettes, mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

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which a curator builds around a set of objects—or in spite of them—or even in the mode of objectless storytelling (Spalding 2002, 55). We find something similar in *The Way of an Object*: when placed in a traditional museum, the artifacts of Dagestani culture are torn from their context and divorced from their sociocultural, utilitarian, and cosmological functions and abilities. Vasnetsov's painting is also taken out of its original milieu and becomes a dead representation of someone else's impenetrable canon. *The Bird Gamayun* was taken to Dagestan to educate the local people according to Western/Russian aesthetic norms; it carries a colonialist agenda that is verbalized in the painting's lines in Makhacheva's performance. The piece is, in fact, a museum intervention that is taken out of the museum and placed right in the street.



FIG. 2.7 Taus Makhacheva, *Tightrope*. Dagestan, 2015. 4Kvideo/73.03, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist.

Makhacheva has continued her decolonization of the museum and problematizing of art and artists in a more recent and larger project that combines performances and video art. At the Sixth Moscow Biennial of Contemporary Art in 2015, her work took the central place in the main pavilion and was presented in two forms: as an original videotaped performance called *Tightrope* (2015) and its Moscow version, which became a more ironic and metaphorical show titled *On the Importance of Pyramids, in the Cultural Perception, on the Strengthening of National Consciousness and the Shaping of the Moral and Ethical Landmarks*. The title rings a bell both with audiences who remember Soviet-style multiculturalism and with those who witness its new edition in the revival of moth-eaten imperial symbols and jargon. An important detail is that this performance was site-specific: it was staged at the heart of the Soviet VDNKh (Vystavka Dostizheniy Narodnogo Khozyaystva/Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy) complex, which used to be the epitome of official multiculturalism and Soviet progressivism. This added ironic overtones of its own.

Like many of Makhacheva's works, *Tightrope* grew out of a concrete situation: the local museum of applied arts was provided with a better and larger building by the Dagestani government. However, the museum staff was asked to move all its collections in one day. Consequently the moving took dramatic and grotesque forms, when the ancient carpets were simply thrown out of the windows into the street to facilitate the moving

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1 process. People from the neighboring houses assumed that the museum
2 was being closed and its collections were stolen or destroyed. But Makh-
3 acheva's work is ultimately not about the precariousness of museums as in-
4 stitutions and their difficult relations with power. The main metaphor used
5 in this project—that of a tightrope walker taking the paintings, one by one
6 from one mountain to another, evokes associations with the fragility of art
7 as such in the face of the changing times, and also with human responsibil-
8 ity for preserving this art. Importantly, it is not just any art, but a history
9 of Dagestani twentieth century painting and its complex relations with
10 modernity. The artist contemplates the links and intersections between
11 the so called academic and traditional art, which used to be considered a
12 mere craft before and at times even today.

13 It is significant that in *Tightrope*, the paintings, which are copies of the
14 sixty-plus main works of Dagestani fine art, are carried across the abyss
15 by the local master of tightrope walking Rasul Abakarov whose family has
16 been rope walking for five generations. This is clearly not an academic, but
17 an indigenous and popular kind of art, as in the case of the puppet theater
18 in the previous project—a craft which has existed for centuries and is still
19 alive. But Makhacheva goes further and gives the rope-walker a strange
20 balance—the problematic canvases of Dagestani artists who, due to the
21 Soviet modernization, were educated in the classical academic tradition and
22 learned to paint in the Russian and Soviet (mostly realistic) style, thus fusing
23 the ethnic-national subjects with essentially Western (though camouflaged
24 as Soviet) aesthetic forms and norms. However the rope walker does not
25 discard these obviously secondary and imitative works. He carries them care-
26 fully from one mountain to another. He is not a Caliban rejecting Prospero's
27 education, then, but a balancing negotiator who is always on the edge, always
28 at the border. This is also a fitting description of Makhacheva's work.

29 In *Tightrope* Makhacheva problematizes models of appreciating and
30 transmitting the history of twentieth-century Dagestani painting and
31 graphics, contemplating whether and how this art can become recogniz-
32 able in a wider context. The video documentation of these performances was
33 immediately acquired by the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, The Nether-
34 lands, and Belgium's Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (Antwerp
35 Museum of Contemporary Art), for their permanent collections. And this is
36 in itself a way of making Dagestani artists (both contemporary, like Taus
37 Makhacheva, and the forgotten ones, the copies of whose work are carried
38 across) visible and known in the world. Makhacheva draws our attention

to how complex and unpredictable are both the creative process and its legitimation. She sees artists as taking a risk with every new project, just as a tightrope walker does with each new trip across the abyss. But she also reflects on the importance of the custodians and keepers of continuity, who are skillful acrobats, risking their lives for the art's sake. It is a musing on the complexity of the ways of transferring the ethnic-national cultural traditions and the precariousness of artists and their work. Its results are never known in advance—we cannot know if success or failure awaits us as creators, and many ingenious works never find their way into museums, collections, and cultural memory, figuratively falling into the abyss of oblivion.

The museum in Makhacheva's *Tightrope* is the opposite of the notorious white cube. It is rather presented through the two destination points linked by the rope. The first is a semblance of a bicycle parking-stand, in which the paintings are located so close to each other in the racks, that they are almost breathing in each other's backs. The second is a metal cage, in which the canvases have a little more space, as in a real museum storage. It manifests the idea of a movable museum, which has attracted Makhacheva for a long time. What I find liberating in this work is that art in its precarious and vulnerable situation of being balanced by a rope walker over the abyss, is paradoxically much more living, breathing and free, than when it is placed in the dusty halls of any traditional museum. At this point the paintings suddenly become part of the decanonized present, not yet or no more in the museum. This invigorating affective moment of reviving the art through a tight-rope walking experience, was reproduced at the Moscow Biennial, where instead of the missing real mountains Makhacheva constructed the imagined ones—the pyramids which were made out of the acrobats' bodies. The young athletes proceeded to do the same job as Abakarov did before—carefully, one by one they carried all the sixty one paintings from the bicycle stand to the metal storage on the other side of the hall.

A Caucasus Midnight Child

The Chechen Aslan Gaisumov is another example of a young artist from the Caucasus who has quickly gained international fame. Many of his works tell about the war, which has affected his life from its start, as Gaisumov spent his childhood in a refugee camp in Ingushetia. Yet he finds unusual and indirect ways to tell the war narratives, avoiding both sensationalism and the documentary dryness of official military reports. His view is never that of any fighting side; rather, it is of the ordinary people who find themselves in the



FIG. 2.8 Aslan Gaisumov, *No Need for Theories*. 2011. Mixed Media (book, soil), 7.5 cm × 12 cm × 26 cm. From the series *Untitled (War)*. Courtesy of the artist and Zink Gallery, Berlin.

midst of war against their will. One of his best-known works, the series *Untitled (War)* (2013), consists of books that all bear traces of war. The books act in unusual and unnatural functions. They are witnesses, victims, and even accomplices of the war crimes. The books may be used to make fires to warm up the children, but they may also contain clockwork bombs and be intended to kill and not to educate. In Gaisumov's works stark metaphors often reveal their scary real side—in this case, it is the books that normally represent everything that is opposed to war, such as human culture, intellect, knowledge, and poetry. Yet at the same time, the books are not just representations; they are real traces of human lives continuing in spite of the war.

The same shifting and liquid border between stark metaphor and cruel reality is at the center of Gaisumov's *Volga* (2015), which may look like a grotesque exaggeration of the penchant for extended families typical for the natives of the Caucasus and a play on the stereotypical Russian fear of these clans invading Moscow. If its characters were going to the market or just to visit relatives in the village, even were moving to Moscow in quest of a better life, the piece would have been merely a funny video of twenty-plus people slowly disappearing, in contradiction to all physical laws, into an old

Soviet Volga car. But the point of decolonial catharsis here is that it all really happened. When Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, was bombed by the Russian Army, Aslan's family first decided to hide in their native village in the mountains. To save as many people as possible, they really gathered and fit twenty-six relatives into a single Volga. Reflecting on this event today, Gaisumov realizes that the situation looks like a slapstick comedy. Yet it is tragic, as well, if we look at it from the time perspective of twenty years later and with an awareness of all of the ruined lives, deaths and losses, new beginnings and vanished hopes. The decolonial optic in this work hides precisely in this temporal lag, in the appreciation of what happened after the characters got into the Volga. Yet the video is not negative; it is full of humor and self-irony. It celebrates the peoples' ability to see the lighter and funnier side of any cheerless event—an ability that helps them to survive and prevail in any situation that is obviously the case of Chechnya and its long-suffering people.

Nevertheless, Gaisumov realizes that the cataclysms of recent history, the many layers of colonization, repression, destruction, exile, have been hard on the Chechen culture, making it at times almost impossible for it to survive. In a number of his works, the artist reflects on the ways of this survival in utmost situations, when completely different experiences and outlooks make generation gaps hard to breach. Each generation of Chechens has its own memory and its own version of history. Older people remember Stalin's deportations; the generation born immediately afterward, however, is free from that trauma and tends to idealize the Soviet Chechnya of the 1960s and 1970s. Gaisumov's peers grew up in tents and basements, hiding from the army's attacks and bombing; the younger generation of Chechens may not know what Grozny looked like before it was rebuilt by Ramzan Kadyrov as a shameless replica of the United Arab Emirates. What makes all these people Chechens, if anything? the artist seems to ask.

In fact, in one of our many long conversations over Skype, Gaisumov went even deeper, questioning the pervasive local patriotic pride of Grozny and thus moving to the previous layer of colonial history and problematizing the collective memory. What is Chechnya's capital, Grozny (lit., "fear-some" in Russian), after all, if not a military fort in the Caucasus redoubt line, built to "protect" invading tsarist Russian troops from the "attacks" of the unconquered local people and later made into the capital of one of the Soviet "autonomous" republics under total Russian control. Grozny was mostly reserved for the Russian/Soviet settler colonists; no locals were even allowed to live there until the last decades of the twentieth century.



FIG. 2.9 Aslan Gaisumov, *Untitled*. 2015. Mixed media: one original Chechen water jug from the nineteenth century; six glass copies of the national Chechen water jugs. Courtesy of the artist and Zink Gallery, Berlin.

Gaisumov, like Makhacheva, acts as a participative anthropologist in dialogue with the audience's aesthesis, evoking bodily memories, sensuous responses, and erased and forgotten historical realities. In *Untitled* (2015), he uses Murano glass in the form of the traditional metal jugs women used to carry water in Chechen villages in the past—that is, when people were not thinking of only physical survival and were not forced into a permanent state of exception, making them forget about unimportant things such as the crafts and traditions that were slipping into oblivion. Gaisumov's jugs are made of the transparent Murano glass and are devoid of any utilitarian purposes. Rather, he offers an embodied vision of an ex-colonial ethnic culture. It is a reflection on temporality, on the whimsies and manipulations of memory and the difficulties of recovering the communal object in the world of commodities. Gaisumov strives to detect, in what elusive and escaping images, objects, memories and sensations a culture continues to live, when it is constantly uprooted, exiled, destroyed and remodeled. His jars are an attempt to represent such an embodied memory as the only remaining way of preserving the cultural constants for the future generations. The jars are transparent, clear and lucid structures, which can be later filled with any meaning by each new generation.



FIG. 2.10 Aslan Gaisumov, analogue black-and-white photograph for the project *People of No Consequence*. 2016. Courtesy of the artist.



FIG. 2.11 Aslan Gaisumov, analogue black-and-white photograph for the project *People of No Consequence*. 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

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1 Gaisumov believes that culture is not stagnant. It is not waiting for the
2 return of its exiles, which makes us all potential strangers in our native
3 lands. Any attempt to revive original traditions turns out to be false. Gaisu-
4 mov explained to me that his idea to make the glass jugs was prompted by
5 ancient vessels that are put together from remaining bits and pieces and
6 then exhibited in museums. In many cases, the missing parts are replaced
7 with glass elements. In the case of Chechen culture, almost everything
8 is missing; therefore, making a metaphor of this culture as a glass jug a
9 powerful, if indirect, way to admit that the tradition is gone, that there are
10 no authentic parts left. Today such jugs risk becoming dysfunctional ob-
11 jects that do not fit into any culture. There is no brook left to which women
12 can go to get water. There are no people who can tell us who owned the
13 jugs just by looking at their shapes and ornaments. The meaning of such
14 actions has been lost forever. Yet, as in the case of *Volga*, Gaisumov does not
15 see this as a tragedy. For him, a culture that is always on the road can find
16 new forms of survival. The jugs are empty and waiting for new generations
17 to fill them with their own meanings.

18 Decolonial aesthetics in the former Soviet Union acquires different, often
19 unexpected forms that merge and juxtapose the postcolonial, post-socialist,
20 global neoliberal, national fundamentalist, neo-imperial and several other
21 dimensions. Yet in each of the analyzed cases, the artists try to put together
22 a complex and multilayered picture of the post-Soviet human condition
23 and reflect on the present and future of the people living in this world.
24 They do this from the position of critical border detachment that allows
25 for successful de-automatizing of aesthetic principles and is often linked to
26 efforts to accentuate the suppressed elements of aesthetics. As a result, such
27 works have broken through to a set of refreshing decolonial affects. This
28 urge is carefully kept away from any dogmatic interpretations and seen
29 instead as a flexible, live, and shifting field of social, cultural, artistic, and
30 existential creativity.

CHAPTER THREE

A Woman Who Has Many Selves and Takes Over Many Spaces A Conversation with Liina Siib

Liina Siib is one of the leading Estonian visual artists, feminist thinkers, curators and activists who represented Estonia at the 54th Venice Biennale with her photographic project *A Woman Takes Little Space*, exhibited at Palazzo Malipiero in 2011. Interviewing Liina was quite interesting for me as we belong to the same generation and also share the post-Soviet sensibility. The latter is true in spite of important differences in our experience and descent, in spite of the fact that, in my life, the postcolonial element prevails. Siib is connected with Estonia, which for many centuries has undergone a number of direct and indirect colonizations and assimilations, by both the more powerful Western European states and also the subaltern Russian empire and, later the USSR marked by the imperial difference. This shared Soviet experience still holds our common hermeneutical horizon together and allows for numerous critical conceptualizations and reflections.

The second node of our affective communication is feminist solidarity, which is also marked by the postsocialist condition. Positionalities such as Siib's are crucial for any efforts to conceptualize the nature of imperial difference and the paradoxical forms of colonial difference it generates in the cases



FIG. 3.1 Liina Siib, *A Woman Takes Little Space*. Ongoing series since 2007. Digitally edited analogue color photography, pigmented ink print, 30 cm × 45 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

when the “colonies” initially are more successful in their economic, social and cultural development than the metropolis. Today’s belated and ultimately failed return of these countries to the European bosom has exposed the older and never properly critically assessed layers of the Baltic identity connected with internal European colonization and the forceful transformation into “second-rate” Europeans who are once again put into the state of dependence and forever catching up the neoliberal global modernity/coloniality.

MADINA TLOSTANOVA: Having seen several of your projects, I have an impression that space and spatial history are important categories in your work. I would like to ask you about your own perception of space (maybe in relation to time), home and “unhomeliness” to use Homi Bhabha’s famous definition for “the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” (Bhabha 1994, 9); the spaces of freedom and constraint, space and/as corporality, especially gendered corporality, in the context of the East European postsocialist local history?

LIINA SIIB: It seems to be so. Indeed, I see and experience the world around me through places and spaces. Space can be perceived as a

substance where all sorts of things can happen in which human beings are involved. It means how ordinary people act and operate in different spaces, ideologies and systems, how do they find mechanisms of resistance. What can we do with the space, indoors and outdoors, what space is left for women? Or what has come through the history of a place that has been intriguing, pointing at something relevant in the present, which could be rebuilt, restaged, reenacted, reinvented and represented. I have preferred urban spaces and the spaces with a dark history, execution sites, and some strange empty places in cities as “the scenes of the crimes,” after Walter Benjamin, who was inspired by the images by Eugène Atget. The place can be fixed and indifferent, but a scene already presumes a participant, a distance, a viewer, the meaning that something can happen there or has already happened.

I agree to the most with Michel de Certeau that a space is a practiced place. A place that can be suitable for the performance, a place as a stage—it can become a space through directing its possible social agendas into *mise-en-scènes* and *tableaux vivants* depicting desirable ideologies and conversations. The possibility of a *mise-en-scène* turns these locations into hidden treasures, mining fields for artists or narrators. A spoken space is a space that has its stories where something that has happened will be revised and retold in a contemporary context. As de Certeau put it haunted places are the only ones in which people can live. Plus, if one happens to be a camera-based person, add the “optical unconscious,” a term coined by Benjamin, so very true. Unspoken and invisible places. Haunting places and social spaces. Other spaces or heterotopias as Foucault described them. Thus, there are countless ways to practice space every day, in order to evoke one’s fantasies and dreams, to call social ghosts back. It has been a pleasure to find out whether it is possible to examine the space through its representations. How the actual space becoming a representational space could make invisible social structures visible and present.

Places that still keep appearing in my dreams belong to my childhood—the flat where we lived—it was not very big but the outdoor space was a kingdom nearby the south border of Tallinn that contained a river, a forest, huge meadows, many children to play with, some strange characters which could be seen as “others”—drunkards,

1 tramps, political abjects and persons with social stigmas (no one
2 spoke publicly of those who returned from Gulag concentration
3 camps), black marketers, Russian army troops and hippies among
4 other remarkable figures. Our homely “Cold War” time. I guess this
5 setting created a certain carnivalesque, enchanting fabric, a perma-
6 nent strain for freedom whatever it means.

7 These oneiric places revolve around our small kitchen, the gas
8 stove, the Snaigé fridge, the bathroom where my parents developed
9 their black and white photographs in the weekends and the transis-
10 tor radio where my mother listened to the Voice of America. I was
11 sent to calm down in the dark bathroom or in the corner of the living
12 room when I had been a naughty girl. Pedagogical spatial practice of
13 introspection! To track down the genetic relationship to the space
14 as much as I remember and have been told one of my grandmothers
15 died young because she spent all her physical strength and efforts
16 to create a huge fairytale-like flower garden by the farmhouse, the
17 other grandmother who used to move around all of the furniture in
18 her house every other month (alone! heavy early twentieth century
19 solid wood stuff), my mother who was keeping the places where she
20 lived under a perfect structured control and order, just places and not
21 people, but perhaps, who knows, keeping certain control over the
22 family via her space, myself—ending up drifting in the streets and
23 sometimes designing temporary furniture for exhibitions.

24 A nongendered flânerie. My first urban walks in Tallinn and Saint
25 Petersburg in the 1980s as an art student, continued in 1992 in Paris,
26 in 1995 in New York, in 1998 in San Francisco, in 2002–2005 in
27 London, etc. Walking and walking and feeling the city in my feet,
28 in my legs, in my head, waiting for a change in atmosphere in differ-
29 ent neighborhoods, outskirts, wasteland, docks, warehouses, poorer
30 suburbs. I usually do not feel much comfort in posh places, in the
31 areas where money speaks. It is a too predictable setting. In Estonia I
32 can go around and look for the metaphysics of spaces and buildings,
33 in Beijing or in London, being more and more influenced by anthro-
34 pology and sociology I wonder how people perform their everyday
35 activities.

36 While walking I can compose texts in my mind, settle down and
37 up ideas that circle in my head. It reminds me of a Kantian practice:
38 he is told to have been going for a walk every day at a certain time

in the main park of Königsberg. In 1999, when I happened to visit Kaliningrad, I decided to discover his possible tracks, but found only a miserable, wild and neglected place without any spell of aesthetics. In the Soviet period, we desperately wished to be part of the Western system, now we share its modes of production and democracy but we are still Eastern Europe. Maybe it hurt in the beginning, since we wanted nothing to do with the Soviet system and its traces. We knew the West as a representation, as the “langue,” but we could not practice it as a “parole.” It has been interesting to follow how one rhetoric is replaced by another, quasi-religious “new human” politics turns into an esoteric global consumer politics. Although we swim in the pool which is tiled with Western Paroles, this is not enough to overcome the psycho-geographies—whatever is the system, we are still not perceived by the West as part of it but rather seen as the postsocialist space. And who cares, except perhaps some politicians? One gets used to this particular identity. The most stunning thing to realize in transformations is that the systems can be transformed while the people can hardly do so. All that has been repressed returns at some point. The revolutionary spirit with its burning flames fades away fast, but its ashes become a great fertilizer for the spirit of conservatism and conformity.

TLOSTANOVA: Post-socialism is a problematic construct and yet it is a shared past, particularly for the people of our generation, a complex experience that we cannot undo as much as we wanted to. It is folded in our embodied memories, in our geopolitics of being, of gender, of perception. How do you feel about the postsocialist critical agenda in contemporary art and/or activism today? Is it viable and promising or doomed to be more and more ossified and “museumized”? We are all different of course, and yet is there anything that can allow us speaking of the “postsocialist subject” or maybe even “postsocialist woman” and if so, what lies at the core of this (self)identification? Virginia Woolf’s famous concept of the room of one’s own—how does it work in the case of the postsocialist women or does it at all? Can the shared Socialist experience be a source and a ground for a possible coalition to make our world a better place for us all?

SIIB: No, we cannot undo it. As I just explained, it is impossible, we embody it. Our bodies are trained under the Soviet discipline, in its

1 kindergartens, its schools and universities, in the working places. As
2 much as we wish to undo it, our bodies still remember it and act ac-
3 cordingly. Living in the Soviet Union was not my personal dream, but
4 at least this bad dream ended in 1991. Its totalitarian regime had been
5 violently imposed onto my country, Estonia, and it made systemati-
6 cal efforts to destroy the local spirit, memory, fabric and flesh. I do
7 not know anyone who did not suffer from it. I think we still do. Even
8 if the bodies survived, the souls are corrupted by the conformity to
9 reality.

10 Since Socialism in Soviet understanding meant a totalitarian regime,
11 it was a distorted version of Socialism. It meant double exploitation
12 for women. It meant being placed in prison or mental hospital if one
13 was not conformist enough. Maybe the best of this Soviet experience
14 was that so many of us adopted an absurd relationship with life, an
15 immunity to empty words, a prompt ability to detect lies, a skepti-
16 cism of the state and any reforms, a tactic of resistance. The worst
17 legacy of the Soviet Socialist system is perhaps the contaminated con-
18 cepts of the left-wing ideas such as solidarity, unions, emancipation,
19 equality, even the word “Socialism” itself was a taboo for some time.

20 Postsocialism as a construct could help us put the lived experi-
21 ences into a critical context, to compare the Socialist conditions of
22 the second half of the twentieth century with the present neoliberal
23 agenda. The experience of living under the Soviet regime could be
24 taken as an asset helping to realize what it means to live in a free world.
25 What are these two systems about, where do they overlap, why do
26 they go in opposite directions? What is still wrong in this picture?

27 Of course, some people whose roots are in the Soviet regime expe-
28 rience today a Stockholm syndrome and even long for the Soviet past
29 (why?—“at least there were neither refugees nor homosexuals”).
30 Others who are in power refuse to see any alternatives to their ruling
31 methods which is obviously a manifestation of ‘the one party’ syn-
32 drome. I think it is far too early to throw the postsocialist construct
33 into the waste bin or place it into a museum.

34 In every evil, there is something good to be considered, in the So-
35 viet Socialism maybe there were examples of social welfare, edu-
36 cation and solidarity, at least in words. The capitalist abundance has
37 helped to overcome the everyday lack of goods for many; it has brought
38 freedom of speech and travel. But it has not obliterated poverty. The

Soviet trauma lies deep inside us beneath the new layers of life and affects us more than we would like to admit. This postsocialist space around us seems to be an aura and a stigma at the same time. Yet, it ought to be discussed through a contemporary prism, to see how we ended up where we are now. Was the Socialist condition the reason or something else? As our society is turning to conservative values in full speed, there is often a *déjà vu* feeling from the 1980s—the strange hollow rhetoric, the doublespeak, bureaucracy, the party system and the loyalty to the party, scheming, careerism, nostalgia for the Soviet period, intolerance of the other, living in the bubble, social blindness, corruption, etcetera.

Contemporary art can deal with these issues critically. It can provide strategies to question conformity and conservative values. Even more—art can help provide resistance to different policies of obedience. There is a problem that quite often these themes get labeled and ghettoed, and put aside because they are not considered to be the proper subject of contemporary art as an aesthetic concept. But I do not see anyone else to deal with these issues rather than contemporary artists who have time to tackle the whole picture in its entirety, and to carry on their artistic research of the social topics. How to maintain critical positions in contemporary art is more and more under question. How to make a work that is intellectually engaging? How to avoid the blindness of the social issues, how to give voice to different agendas in order to make them visible, even if these themes are not popular, entertaining, or presenting another model of success. Maybe Eastern Europe as a place with a weaker art gallery system is indeed the right space to make art from the critical position and to find time to consider the politics of representation? And please, never forget about the poetry when the personal becomes the political.

I played around the ideas from different systems and ideologies in my interactive performance *Mass Line*, produced by the Lilith Performance Studio in Malmö in the autumn of 2013. It was based on my notes from Beijing, China, with its communist Capitalism system and watching all the James Bond films, something that was banned in the Soviet Union until the 1990s. The performance merged China and the Western political ideologies through an analysis and practice-oriented observation of systems, prohibitions and orders, both large and small.

1 In the course of *Mass Line* that engaged around forty professional and
2 amateur actors and the audience, we asked ourselves what space we
3 can claim when there is not any. In the *Mass Line* system, a Western
4 character like James Bond could turn into a world leader and a role
5 model. The dictator's propaganda machinery took the karaoke form,
6 whereas entertainment for the people was a cheap Western copy of
7 a Beijing opera.

8 *Mass Line* was distinctly political and yet at the same time it was a
9 highly poetic performance mostly based on my own observations and
10 experience of living in a closed country. We played with large politi-
11 cal and social systems that we all had to follow in order to be part of
12 the group. These are systems, whose intensions are to keep us occu-
13 pied, to act properly and keep us in line. In countries with powerful
14 leadership and control system people used to pretend, to be someone
15 different in public than at home. Everyone became an actor ready to
16 stage what the system expected from them, performing ideologies as
17 one's second nature. And this was a wise survival tactic for everyday
18 life. In the end it is impossible to decide what a performance is and
19 what is authentic.

20 In my work *A Room of One's Own*, a video and photo installation
21 from 2011, I tried to find out how much space was left for a woman
22 as a mother and a wife in a new suburban family house. It seems that
23 women and femininity are determined by space—think of the com-
24 munal flats in the Soviet Union or the one-family suburban homes
25 in America in the 1950s (the Estonian equivalent is the early twenty-
26 first century houses built in the fields close to the city). The Soviet
27 woman did not need much space at home, because she was mostly
28 away at work. The American woman as a mother and a wife did not
29 need separate space as she was there to serve others. Virginia Woolf
30 stated once that a woman must have money and a room of her own
31 if she is to write fiction.

32 Women are shown their place by way of space, or as Julia Kristeva
33 said, femininity can be understood as a position in the border areas.
34 At the same time the new influences enter any culture, namely
35 through the borders. Working with the woman-space relations I
36 have begun to see more clearly how unconscious and silent power
37 lines determine the behavioral patterns of men and women and
38 their spatial positions. Estonian women want to live in the Ameri-

can dream, but to achieve it, they have to work in town, send their children to kindergartens in town, as there are no such establishments near where they live, the nearest shop and even the bus stop are miles away.

As a spatial installation, *A Room of One's Own* was furnished as a typically cramped sitting room in a new residential area, where the viewer sees the photographs of the mother, and the TV-monitors alternating with women dancing in a winter landscape. One's own room in the title does not tell us whose room it is, if it belongs to a man or a woman. In the text, Woolf tells about a place where a woman can be on her own, which disrupts her daily chores and makes room for reflection. Like an artist's studio, a room of her own is essential for a woman who wants to write. This room means a disruption of the mundane, and although it is furnished modestly as a sitting-room, it is a place that reflects the joy of life, because, according to Woolf, a writer struggling in the shackles of hatred and worry cannot create anything permanent.

The main link of the inhabitants of the new residential settlements to the outside world, except their office and kindergarten in town, is television, the larger the better. It is so big that their neighbors across the road have no need to switch theirs on. These women are happy; most of them have a job and a peaceful, safe home, even if storms cause occasional power cuts. These women have their own houses, which means they have a lot more space. However, this space is furnished in a very similar way. The houses bought with the young family loans, feature an open kitchen, so that mothers could see what the children are doing. These women are constantly available to their families, they lack any private space. I found that the real masters of the house are the children. Incidentally, quite a few of these women, with a varying shade of red hair, were reading the book *Eat. Pray. Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert (amazing, we were born on the same day!).

Artist Sirje Ainso from the Estonian diaspora in Argentina who saw the installation in the Estonian pavilion at the Venice Art Biennale in 2011 decided that I had Soviet nostalgia and I was showing Estonia in a regretful manner: "How does the described represent Estonia . . . ? Does the artist's topic with a 'social message' justify this display, which shows Estonia in a worse light than any 'fourth world' country, where nobody wants to go? . . . Unfortunately, the artist has

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FIG. 3.2 Liina Siib, *A Woman Takes Little Space*. Ongoing series since 2007. Digitally edited analogue color photography, pigmented ink print, 30 cm × 45 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

despite her education and today's opportunities, both feet still firmly planted in the Soviet era—is this inertia or nostalgia . . . ? Too bad this chance to present Estonia as a cultured country was lost.”

In 2007 I began the photographic series *A Woman Takes Little Space* as a reaction to the debate in the media about the gender-based discrimination and pay gap. According to EU statistics, in Estonia the unadjusted gender pay gap was 30.9 percent in 2007. It which was the highest in the EU and until now, it still is. The less paid labor sectors in Estonia are also mostly occupied by female employees: textile industry, cleaning service, social welfare, sport, amusement and leisure activities, food and drink services, social and cultural institutions (archives, libraries, museums, etc.), retail trade and catering establishments.

I met nearly all of the women “who take little space” by chance in public spaces. Mostly they were strangers, and in some cases they remained so, although I always made a point of asking their permission and explain why I needed that picture: to show a working woman via space. I take these photographs in order to make certain situations visible. Estonian women occasionally seem to be too well adapted to the model of working women, which is prescribed by gender roles.

Their professional identity is largely shaped by their employer, who arranges the workplace for women employees depending on the nature of their work and never thinking of women themselves. Due to submissiveness and low self-esteem, the women never complain about their working conditions. The retirees, the temporary employed, or those fearing to be made redundant are not going to take any risks. Many jobs with dismal conditions and low salary are taken up by Russian-speaking women. When I was taking the pictures, I naturally asked myself, “What can a woman do in a situation like this?”

Thus, I started wondering what the situation is like for building coalitions, solidarity, benevolent and trust-respect relationships at the working place in the circumstances of precarious labor and in the society that mostly praises success and individuality. Considering differences as a resource of power, performing mutual empowerment can raise the courage to stand firm for one’s rights, including the rights for gender equality. Solidarity presumes an ability to communicate and, following Karl Marx, space plays an important role in the development of the social consciousness, as through communication the groups can prove their solidarity to others. The contemporary precarious work creates migrant spaces. Whatever the space, one needs to expand it for relations, bonds, links that can bring any groups of inequality together—for support, humor, sympathy, and solidarity against the market and the philosophy of profit which erase our humanity every second and in every aspect. To find a balance between “*solidaire*” and “*solitaire*.”

TLOSTANOVA: What strikes me in most of your work is a subtle and multilayered irony, a cunning tongue-in-cheek rendering of often painful and cruel subjects, which in my perception is similar to the Armenian Queering Yerevan Collective’s tactic of slant activism. (Instead of confronting the patriarchal and heteronormative state head-on, the members of this collective use indirect, ironic, double-entendre ways of making their political and aesthetic statements.) In your fascinating project *A Woman Takes Little Space* you apply irony very effectively, weaving it through your complex reflections on the prescribed women’s roles, unchanging under any regimes (democratic or autocratic), the curse of muteness and submissiveness and various ways of going around and beyond it, the inescapable objectification,

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1 and creativity and freedom crammed into constrained spatial condi-
 2 tions in both literal and figurative sense. Do you think then that irony
 3 is more effective than any blunt collision with, or resistance to power
 4 and authority? Do you see irony as a powerful decolonizing force?

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 6 **STIB:** Oh, I did not know about the Queering Yerevan Collective's
 7 work before. *A Woman Takes Little Space* depicts quite different
 8 women in their working environment. Sometimes they argued that
 9 there was nothing particular in them, that there was no point in taking
 10 pictures of them. They did not consider the image of a working woman
 11 to be worthwhile or beautiful. And so there are not many images of
 12 women in their workplaces in today's media, except when a business
 13 goes bust. At the same time I do not want to repeat the ideological
 14 construction where human beings in their daily situation are placed in
 15 a heroic presented as victims. As for situations, it was important that a
 16 point in the passing randomness momentarily touched upon a point in
 17 myself, has made me identify with a person and a situation. It is a sub-
 18 jective sympathy of a sort. A woman becomes an actor who plays her
 19 own life, as in a neo-realist approach. Most of the represented women
 20 have had a good sense of humor that was reflected in the photographs
 21 as well. Humor attracts humor? Isn't it a possibility for a coalition?!

22 But, yes, irony has also been with me as long as I remember. For
 23 me it has been difficult to be solemn, serious, even in the hardest situ-
 24 ations, even when dealing with the subject that I do care and am se-
 25 rious about. But the tactics, the approach . . . Yes, it is something
 26 else. Recently I have been thinking critically about my ironic position.
 27 Why am I ironical, even cynical, in some works? Maybe it has to do
 28 with the language; maybe the bitter truth is easier to convey through
 29 humor or satire. Maybe this is an inseparable part of me as a "post-
 30 socialist" subject. People who have lived under totalitarian regimes
 31 acquire a bred-in-the-bone irony as part of their survival strategy. .

32 I elaborated on this theme in my video work *Compromise Excluded*,
 33 in which illusion and reality were hopelessly and schizophrenically
 34 mixed, but the possible fictitiousness of situations was quite decep-
 35 tive. It grew out of pervasive violence that occurred in recent Es-
 36 tonian history. The heroes were extremists, the totalitarian left-and
 37 right-wingers, Communists and Fascists who rejected pluralism and
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FIG. 3.3 Liina Siib, still image at 12 minutes, 41 seconds from the video *Mass Line: Office 1*. 2013. Produced by Lilith Performance Studio, Malmö, Sweden. Courtesy of the artist.

detested democratic processes. The videos, mostly explored the well-known places of aggression and executions. Here the location itself became one of the characters in the story. Irony comes into play when reality cannot be reasonably signified; when truth and lies are hopelessly confused. Irony, then, is a signifying practice, an action. The absurd is even more an action than irony. I really like the Dadaist practices and have come to do similar things myself more often. It also seems that putting together the high and the low is often rewarding.

There is a problem with irony: it somehow offers a safe position, a safe distance between the subject and the audience. It confirms the existing patterns. This has made me think if I am really doing justice to my subjects this way. I have used the irony consciously as a figure of speech, as my rhetoric that enables me to perform a montage-like representation, with juxtapositions and counterpoints. Who knows, maybe humor is a better way to stress the empathy. An ironic person remains a passive bystander; all she can do is to bitterly sneer at the hopeless circumstances and situations. A different thing would be to take irony to a totally new level, because in the new brave world of bureaucrats, we are facing the new totalitarianism, and here something has to be done without mercy.

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1 TLOSTANOVA: For me, you are a paradigmatic border person in the
 2 sense that you do not seem to belong in either of the many worlds
 3 along which you travel. Yet you travel along these different worlds,
 4 not necessarily human (but maybe companion species), and some-
 5 times quite marginal and forbidden for many other people, with an
 6 open and interested mind and with a loving perception, as María Lu-
 7 gones once said. At the same time, there is a certain detachment, a
 8 certain additional dimension always present in your optics. It could
 9 be connected with your many travels abroad as well as with the very
 10 fact that you are an artist who never entirely belongs and is always
 11 between different worlds, and therefore sees more than those who
 12 belong to just one world. At times it seems that you look even at your-
 13 self from aside. Still, I would like to ask you if there are any important
 14 anchors for your soul, to paraphrase Salman Rushdie, such as language,
 15 place, customs or people, that would help you define your belonging,
 16 or you feel yourself entirely a worldly person even if physically you may
 17 continue living in Estonia? In general, is such a belonging and feeling
 18 at home important for you? Or these are outdated concepts?

19
 20 SIIB: Anchors—outdated or not—I do feel cosmopolitan for sure.
 21 My family has kept me in Estonia, the graves of my ancestors. I am
 22 as morbid as any proper Estonian who has plenty of funeral photos
 23 in their family albums: grandmothers, grandfathers, the father, the
 24 mother. My mother died this summer (2015) and after her death the
 25 feeling of being a complete “stranger” here has strongly struck me. It
 26 seems like with my mother, I have lost my country, although a citi-
 27 zen, I have become a mental refugee. But fortunately I still have very
 28 good friends that make me feel at home. Friendships really matter.
 29 And sometimes I remember that it was certainly the highlight of my
 30 life when the iron curtain fell, we could finally travel and Estonia
 31 regained its independence. Freedom is the main thing. The possibil-
 32 ity to decide on my own and to make my own choices. And always
 33 reminding myself of resistance.

34 I have always liked the fable by Jean de La Fontaine “The Wolf and
 35 The Dog,” where the latter praises his good life and almost convinces
 36 the Wolf. But suddenly the Wolf detects a galled spot on his neck:

37 “What’s that?” he cries. “Oh, nothing but a speck . . .
 38 Perhaps the collar’s mark by which they chain me.”

“Chain! Chain you! What! Run you not, then,	1
Just where you please and when?”	2
“Not always, sir; but what of that?”	3
“Enough for me, to spoil your fat!” . . . !” . . .	4
I like languages—if I did not become an artist, I would have	5
wished to become a linguist. I do feel belonging to nature and to cul-	6
ture, certainty to the art community. Films, books, everyday practices	7
and history are all part of my homeland, as well as teaching at the art	8
academy, discussing contemporary art context. And there is some id-	9
iosyncrasy in my works that reappears again and again, like the social	10
aspects of life in a society and its margins—the people.	11
Looking at myself from aside—I remember doing this already	12
from my childhood—I have always looked at myself with someone	13
else’s eyes. This knowledge has not made me happier though. I try	14
to keep things dynamic, to see what happens, acting by nonacting.	15
It is difficult to take seriously anything that becomes a system or a	16
method that becomes orthodox, and quite often a belonging to any	17
group can become just that—a frozen orthodoxy. I do not go to the	18
barricades, but rather to the outskirts, to observe how the other half	19
lives. There are too many themes, but they keep repeating like the	20
places on my photos—graveyards, ships, and prisons. . . .	21
	22
TLOSTANOVA: How would you define the political potential of art in	23
today’s world? Is art less or more effective than social movements or	24
critical theories in changing reality and the way people think and see	25
the world? What is a political art for you? Should art be political at	26
all and in what ways if so? Godard once said that instead of making	27
political films he wants to make films politically. Do you think it is an	28
important distinction today? Or maybe ethical and other dimensions	29
are more important for art than politics?	30
	31
SIIB: The political potential of art and the possibility of choosing	32
the tools for the politics of representation is something that seems	33
always to be present in art as one of its important characteristics.	34
When there is “us” and “them,” there is always politics, a political	35
situation. In repressive ideological environments, even escapist art	36
can declare a certain politics. In today’s world the amount of infor-	37
mation is immense and it is easy to lose one’s sight and mind, not to	38
mention one’s focus. It is easier to turn to entertainment, but even	

1 in that sphere there are political avenues. How then can we shape
 2 a lucid artistic position, how can we keep it in accordance with the
 3 dynamics of time and how not to become an opportunist willing to
 4 grab the “urgent” and “burning” issues for easy political profit? These
 5 are the questions and the hard work to accomplish.

6 There are at least two kinds of political connotations in any art-
 7 work: first, the immediate reaction to everyday reality, and second,
 8 the hidden layers that only begin to speak when time passes by. I
 9 doubt that much of the Soviet time resistance art would have the
 10 same significance for today’s viewer as it used to be in the closed
 11 society with its doublespeak. Yet if an avant-garde resisting art piece
 12 will be hung alongside the mainstream commissioned politically cor-
 13 rect art work, the intelligent viewer would hopefully detect the dif-
 14 ference, the boundary between the truth and the lie, and also see
 15 the different regimes of representation. Of course, here irony is a
 16 catalyst. Good art always has several layers and if done honestly with
 17 one’s heart and mind, the new layers of meaning will emerge and
 18 manifest the latent political agenda in a new context.

19 Art as any other form within a culture should aim for critical at-
 20 titude and signification, for the new forms, for a contemporary mo-
 21 ment, for resistance to stagnation. Art should aim to exist alongside
 22 with reality in order to influence it and—who knows?—maybe also
 23 change this reality, because changes always start from the tiniest
 24 things. The best thing to do is to be responsible, honest to oneself
 25 and to speak with and to the society. Even if the society does not care
 26 immediately, one still has to continue speaking.

27 With the hegemony of images and cultural consumption, art cer-
 28 tainly has more impact as a (cultural) product, yet well-made and cu-
 29 rated exhibitions create spaces for thinking and sharing and inspire
 30 new ideas. Art is the last island for transgression in the politically
 31 correct world. It is trying out and expanding the borders of human
 32 existence and freedom. There could be mutual empowerment among
 33 artists and people they work with that I find important and essential.

34 Godard saying he wants to make films politically could mean the
 35 same thing about representation—either the work of art is a repre-
 36 sentation of politics (as there are so many commissioned works and
 37 works made under various totalitarian regimes, the ideological art)
 38 or it shows the politics of representation, when the personal becomes

the political. Every artist has to find a balance here, to answer these questions for themselves. And sometimes the work made innocently can become a political statement as well, no matter how humble was the initial idea of an artist. Ethical implications are certainly important and making art should not harm (physically or psychologically) anyone involved in the project. In this respect any artist has to show responsibility. On the other hand, as I mentioned before, art is the last space of transgression which is left today, the space where the craziest ideas can be explored and implemented. Anyway, artists should try to avoid the social blindness as much as possible, and should address urgent problems with their oeuvres. To be present and to swim against the current.

TLOSTANOVA: In our conversation in Tallinn, you mentioned that you are now fascinated with factories. Can you elaborate a little bit on why factories attract your attention as an artist in this notorious postindustrial age?

SIIB: As an art student in the late 1980s, we had a compulsory internship at different factories to draw and paint the working process and the factory environments. Although the views were rather grim, badly lit, with oppressive conditions, I was still quite fascinated with the conveyor system and the grandeur of space, the production scale and sounds. In 1998 I made a series *Le Carceri* in an abandoned cellulose factory in Tallinn where space played the most important role as an imaginary architecture of a sacred and notorious post-industrialist place.

In a way, technology and production are quite in place in the agenda of graphic arts and printmaking. Some ten years ago I taught a course called “Human being and factory” for the graphic department of the art academy, the title refers ironically to the Soviet period theme art exhibitions which were held annually. Back then artists had to show their connection with the working people, no matter was it really their commitment or not. It was done for the representation of politics. So I decided to examine what has happened to the factories in the post-industrial time and how the proletariat looked in the 2000s.

Together with the students we visited several bigger factories in Tallinn. It was an interesting mapping, to see how the analogue technologies have given way to the highly computerized processes

1 with fewer workers, and how the old work benches existed side by
 2 side with computers. Walter Benjamin wrote on the special aura in
 3 “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” I think
 4 that one can also speak of the aura of production sites. But their re-
 5 production is another thing—at least in photography, and here some-
 6 thing has to be constructed, as Benjamin states in his essay talking
 7 about the Krupp factories. The aspect of this “something” which “has
 8 to be constructed” was initially proposed by Bertolt Brecht, because
 9 the reproduction of reality hardly says anything about reality which is
 10 an important factor to consider also in terms of political art. Later I
 11 reshaped the course for the “twenty-first century worker” and made a
 12 visual research survey through time from the beginning of the twenti-
 13 eth century with its Fordist and Soviet industrial ideas until nowadays

14
 15 TLOSTANOVA: Looking back at your different works, you have been
 16 dealing with a diverse array of subjects from gender to alienation and
 17 loneliness, from gazing to precariousness, from growing social gaps
 18 and exclusion to the contradictions and the darker sides of childhood,
 19 from the economy of public and private spaces to the mechanics of
 20 memory and especially embodied memory, and much more. What are
 21 you interested in and what have you found important to address today?

22
 23 SIBB: Too many things. Nowadays, I am continuing with the same
 24 interests and themes—in an altered way, perhaps, but the subjects I
 25 address are still the same: injustice, social haunting, struggles for sur-
 26 vival, ideological constructions, conformity, and compromises. What
 27 does it mean to be human? Perhaps I have adopted a more active
 28 position, bringing into the exhibition performative approaches,
 29 interactions, the process itself rather than the end product of art. I
 30 implement my observations and visual and photographic notes in
 31 performances and reenactments, thus rebuilding the situations.

32
 33 Aristotle said that in order to remember things we need a place.
 34 Places as empty stages incite the viewer’s imagination. Forgetting is
 35 not enough to overcome a difficult burden, because everything comes
 36 back sooner or later. Memory lets itself be repressed to a certain ex-
 37 tent. But then it turns into a creative starting point. The process of
 38 reenacting historical events in contemporary settings, imbuing them
 with new meanings, offers a new chance for something already for-
 gotten, loading it with a contemporary moment. This is important

as it can help make the work comprehensible to the audience. There must be contemporary elements in the works in order to make them relevant or even urgent in today's situations.

Theoretically, I have been lately interested in emblems and how images repeat themselves through history, how society is constructed and how it consciously and unconsciously influences our minds and ideologies, how people perform their everyday lives, the remains of rituals, emptied of any significance or any principal idea. Practically, visualizing resistance is something with which I would like to go on, to study and comment on it. Two sentences describing our contemporary condition keep haunting me:

- 1) "Everyone wants to survive."
- 2) "One has to hide emotions in order to keep the job."

Even I myself was told some months ago by a colleague at the art academy that I am too emotional. So I think I have to do something with emotions, too. And affects.

What is urgent is how to remain an ethical human being, how to save human space, empathy, solidarity, benevolence. In the global world where everyone is trying to survive, it is easy to become blind toward certain groups, classes, phenomena that are just outside the focus. It is easy to start living in one's bubble. What remains significant over time? One's body, freedom of choice and speech, the joy of living (*joie de vivre*), and one's home.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Beyond Dependencies: A Talk with Vyacheslav Akhunov, the Lonely Ranger of Uzbek Contemporary Art

MADINA TLOSTANOVA: In a number of present day authoritarian states, succeeding the USSR, once again, the power dictates the artists what their art should be like. What changes is only the ideological stuffing (usually, there is a shift to a hysterical national patriotic mood), while the mechanisms of imposing unanimous thinking and unanimous stylistics remain largely the same. In the USSR the artists reacted to this pressure among other things, through the underground movement, and you have acted as one of the important underground artists. Do you think that a second edition of the underground is possible today on the remnants of the Soviet empire, including a revival of its importance and influence? Or it is not possible to step twice into the same river, and the time, the context and the people have changed so much that the presence of the underground ambience (such as the apartment exhibitions) does not automatically mean that the spirit of the underground is back?

VYACHESLAV AKHUNOV: The difference between the underground in the USSR and the art of postcolonial Uzbekistan is enormous, in

spite of the fact that the Soviet totalitarian system has not been dismantled in Uzbekistan. In the USSR the available information was so carefully filtered that any sources or true facts related to the modernist art, were practically inaccessible. Paradoxically, this serious shortage of knowledge generated persistent efforts to find information that would not be infected by ideological clichés. Some of it could be fished out from books and articles written by the Soviet art critics who specialized in the criticism of bourgeois art from the viewpoint of the Marxist-Leninist aesthetics.

An artist who was the first to find information on this or that modernist movement, could then quickly apply it to his own work, adding some local Soviet features as well, and even be considered a rather advanced Soviet modernist. This is what happened in the “nonconformist” context, for example in the works of Oscar Rabin, who was under the influence of René Magritte, or Ilya Kabakov who was strongly influenced by Joseph Kosuth. In other words we are speaking here of rediscovering of Western modernist art in the hermetic totalitarian society, isolated from the rest of the world by the “iron curtain.” In reality, for the USSR this was a time of discovery of the white spots on the map of the world art. And this process generated a great thirst and willingness to see the forbidden and inaccessible with one’s own eyes, even if it was only mediated by our own Soviet artists. Following jazz, blues, rock-n-roll, Pepsi Cola and jeans the USSR was penetrated by the contemporary Western art. Interestingly enough, this art had not reached the Soviet capitals of Central Asia and Kazakhstan to such an extent that it could trigger a self-organization of even a small group of nonconformist artists, or could lead to an emergence of the underground and its typical exhibition practices in the form of apartment and closed exhibitions, Samizdat and various dissident activities.

From 1973 to 1980, as a student of the Moscow Art Institute I had to go back and forth two or three times a year from Central Asia to Moscow. When I started making conceptual art I wanted to find like-minded people in my native Kirgizia and in Uzbekistan. But I could not find them either in Tashkent, or in Fergana and Frunze. There were no underground writers, poets, artists or film directors. Later I understood that in the logic of Empire, every thinking individual was striving to get out of the provincial oppression and get settled in the

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1 metropolis (“All the best for the capital of the empire!” The food, the
2 advanced technologies, the best specialists, theaters, actors, museums,
3 libraries and so on). It was not a secret that many parents were dream-
4 ing of sending their children to study in the metropolis so that later
5 they could somehow manage to stay there for good. Today the rich
6 Western countries are an attractive place for people with extraordi-
7 nary abilities, but in those times such a place was the Empire’s capital.
8 Having become the “Muscovites,” the former provincial people were
9 able to raise their status, particularly in the eyes of those compatri-
10 ots who were left on the outskirts of the evil empire. The presence of
11 the diplomatic corps and foreign embassies, of the Soviet specialists
12 who worked abroad and foreign students—all that was the source of
13 information which created an appropriate climate for the “small break-
14 throughs,” particularly in culture and art. In contrast with the metrop-
15 olis the provinces lacked many privileges and first of all, information.

16 The Moscow underground was comprised of both the local artists
17 and the ones who came from the provincial places. Inquisitive minds
18 from the Asian republics, Kazakhstan, the Caucasus, from such re-
19 gions as Siberia, the Urals, the Far East, and the South of Russia were
20 excluded from the nonconformist art process unless they moved to
21 Moscow. They did it for many reasons and primarily in the quest
22 of an environment consisting of the like-minded people, a context in
23 which their works would be recognized and cause reflection.

24 In 1979 I wrote the following words: “A new époque has come—
25 the époque of developed socialism, which allows for the discussion
26 of various problems and problematization in art. Today the Soviet
27 art is divided into the official and nonofficial, or in the opinion of
28 those in power, into the correct and incorrect art. The correct is the
29 socialist realism and the incorrect is all the rest, which does not focus
30 on ideology but on Western modernism instead. There emerged such
31 concepts as “us” and “them” (same and other, native and foreign).
32 We are the correct ones. They are incorrect, the bad guys, almost
33 traitors of the homeland, enemies and renegades. And no cultural
34 dialogue is possible between us and them, between the Soviet us and
35 the Western others. They are with others, and we are against them—
36 this is the logic of the representatives of the official art. The internal
37 multicultural context in the Soviet art was constructed according to
38 the formula “national in its form and socialist in its essence.”

- In the present day Uzbekistan the situation is different: 1
- 1) There is no hunger for information anymore. Any information 2
on contemporary art is available now including political activ- 3
ism in art forms. 4
 - 2) It is possible to freely choose as your artistic priority any— 5
“ism,” to create and exhibit your works. 6
 - 3) The artist is allowed to travel anywhere. 7

Yet each of these new freedoms has its “but” . . . It is all allowed 9
and possible only up to the point when an artist’s work approaches 10
a boundary behind which there starts a discussion of the social and 11
political problems of contemporary Uzbekistan. 12

If the Moscow artistic underground of the 1960–1970s, was pre- 13
dominantly interested in innovative modernist forms which in the 14
conditions of the Cold War was in itself considered a serious political 15
mishap, today it is the artists and the political activists who comprise 16
the underground. There are reasons for that. Art is in a different situ- 17
ation. Due to the impossibility of producing new forms, the main 18
concern is representation and not innovation. The medium has to 19
switch all the efforts towards the representation of the message using 20
the old signs put together in different new combinations. Ten the 21
artistic innovation as a revelation of Truth is not possible. Focusing 22
on representation, particularly of political discourse, transfers the re- 23
sponsibility for innovation to the audience, making it a co-participant 24
in the art process equally responsible for its results. In other words, 25
we have a situation in which art (in this case, politically active art) is 26
not created for the people, but rather is completely delegated to the 27
people who decide themselves what to choose. 28

The main representations are the art forms connected with action- 29
ism, happening, performance, which require a space and an audi- 30
ence. This does not always fit into the idea of apartment exhibitions. 31
Today an apartment exhibition can exist in a different format when 32
an artist makes a performance at some place, and hundreds of specta- 33
tors can stay home and watch the action on-line or share with each 34
other their own mini apartment exhibitions which due to censorship 35
could not get to any official museum space. 36

But we are speaking of a rather small group of politically active 37
artists. While the majority remains ignorant. Consider the fact that 38

1 all the graduates of the Uzbek Art Institute who were sent to continue
2 their studies in Europe (similarly to the Soviet Union where people
3 were sent to study in Moscow and Leningrad on the national quota)
4 came back not knowing what is modernism and contemporary art. A
5 150-year period of art history has remained unknown to them. They
6 never learned to speak the language of modernity and express what
7 is of current interest. “We were studying the great legacy of the Re-
8 naissance masters,”—was their answer. They are disgusted and an-
9 noyed with contemporary art as an expression of liberal European
10 values, because instead of studying the contemporaneity they were
11 busy reading the hackneyed recipes from the old art cook book. Here,
12 among the provincial artistic plankton, they feel at ease. This is not
13 a colonial legacy, rather it is an effect of reflection—an internal colo-
14 nization of the country and the people as a result of the continuous
15 Soviet phobias of the Uzbek political leadership.

16 In a totalitarian state where society is held together by fear and
17 national-patriotic propaganda, there is no space for contemporary art.
18 The official artistic community and the “Academy of Arts” work for
19 maintaining the myth that both national and contemporary art doesn’t
20 only exist, but also flourish pretending that such artistic forums as the
21 Tashkent biennial of contemporary art, plays an important role in the
22 life of society and the state. Largely it is a self-deception strategy.

23 TLOSTANOVA: In several interviews you speak of your rejection or at
24 least, a very cautious attitude to tradition as it is understood in the of-
25 ficial aesthetics imposed from above. You link tradition—interpreted
26 in such way—with an inescapable second-handedness of cultural
27 production in the postsoviet countries. It seems to me that this can
28 be called a colonized consciousness and perception, and today more
29 often, it is a voluntary self-colonization. Yet, do you believe there is
30 some other, not necessarily tradition (as in my view this word itself
31 is too negatively overloaded from the start and marked as stagnant,
32 dark and bad in comparison with modernity), but maybe some sys-
33 tem of aesthetic notions which would be different from the global
34 unified production and also from the local provincial and distorted
35 understanding of national culture and mentality, seen as detached
36 from the course of time and from the needs and wishes of the real
37 people? And if such an open and flexible system does exist after all,
38



FIG. 4.1
Vyacheslav Akhunov, *USSR Stamps and Seals* (Lenin: To conduct a merciless mass terror. To lock the suspicious in the concentration camps.) 1977. Paper, serial print, watercolor, 40 cm × 29.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

at least potentially, should the artists turn to it and remake it? And if yes then how, in what forms?

AKHUNOV: Let us first remember the history: In the nineteen twenties there were efforts to create a revolutionary Central Asian art of avant-garde type by means of subleasing the “second futurist coming” (Alexander Volkov and others)¹. By the early 1930s an artistic system with Socialist realist definitions (such as futurological utopia) was forcefully imposed. Its local departments were created within one state organization—the Artists’ Union with the headquarters in the capital of the Empire. From this center all the appropriate recommendations, orders, and instructions were dispatched to all regional and ethnic-national cultural centers of the country, up to the indications of what topics to explore and in what realistic manner to depict them.

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1 All of these processes had a clear ideologically determined goal:
2 to help the party to remake (colonize) people's consciousness taking
3 into account their local conditions, that is to make a new identity, a
4 Soviet person, a builder of communism in the context of the active
5 destruction of age-old traditions. In several decades the Soviet art
6 had developed a Socialist tradition with its own hierarchy. In fact,
7 what the Czarist government did not manage to do in its colonies (to
8 colonize people's minds and feelings) in almost sixty years of its rule,
9 the communist ideologues accomplished in just three decades. The
10 ideological discourse of Socialist realism corrupted the culture and
11 art of all the countries that belonged to the Socialist camp, drawing
12 them into the funnel of hypocrisy and carrion and causing a social
13 and spiritual duality in the artists' minds and imaginations.

14 Have the Uzbek artists really reconsidered after becoming "in-
15 dependent" the "age old local historical and cultural models and
16 the almost hundred years of the Soviet tradition?" Hardly so . . . The
17 artists with the Soviet aesthetic training changed the faces, clothes
18 and names of their characters, but otherwise the vector remained the
19 same: they make the state and business commissioned works, focus
20 on sales, local market, and serving the power structures. Indeed, for
21 those who are used to live and work within the state regulations and
22 under the spell of the outdated notions, it is hardly possible to risk a
23 step towards any creative independence.

24 In the 1990s, when the Soviet restrictions were lifted, the ma-
25 jority of artists never managed to find a new place in the unknown
26 and hence uncomfortable cultural environment. Having lost the
27 dismantled Artists' Union, they did not strive for the emergence of
28 any independent creative groups and unions based on their shared
29 specific professional ethics and contemporary aesthetic contexts. On
30 the contrary, they wanted to be united once again into yet another
31 agency organized by the top down directive.

32 And what about the new generations of artists who have not expe-
33 rienced the horrors of the totalitarian regime but gladly play the game
34 imposed by the state? What makes them so sluggish in their quest for
35 a new language? Hardly can we interpret this as an expression of some
36 internal instinct, which developed due to local historical, religious,
37 philosophic or aesthetic traditions. But the Soviet tradition as we
38 know not only destroyed all local models, but also carefully protected

the common people and the artists from the alien social constructs	1
and from some feeble efforts to build a new aesthetic reality.	2
Nevertheless, one can trace a delayed line in the works of Uzbek	3
artists—originally a protest line which was completely exhausted by	4
the 1970s–80s. It was shaped as an interest in the Oriental practices	5
such as Sufism, Daoism, and Zen-Buddhism. We should remember	6
that the Sufi concept of the “ideal human being” and its doctrine of	7
moral perfection were at one point regarded as Muslim ideological	8
opposition, and today plays the part of the spiritual and ethical oppo-	9
sition to the existing authoritarian regime. Yet what in the USSR was	10
an alternative to the Soviet ideology and therefore was banned, today	11
is no longer a threat to the dominant discourse, which is working for	12
the creation of the national patriotic narrative. The administration	13
even restores the monuments on Sufi graves and many Sufis are now	14
considered the national spiritual heroes.	15
The postmodernist époque considerably smoothed out the bound-	16
aries between the so called Eastern-oriented and Western-oriented	17
artists. The artists’ demands reach far beyond their local, regional	18
boundaries. They are no longer interested in external, often exotic	19
sides of their culture. There is a deeply grounded wish to get to the	20
roots. In such a context, a propensity for one’s own tradition, not en-	21
riched by the worldly experience, becomes a dead-end in the artist’s	22
quest and development. It is useless to break lances on what is today	23
an Uzbek artist—an “Asian type,” a “European type,” or some variety	24
of Eurasianism.	25
There is a threatening pressure of the never dismantled past on	26
the present. But how deeply does the splinter of passeism sit in the	27
unconsciousness of Uzbek artists? I think that there has never been	28
such a penchant for the past, such conservatism, such a hostile at-	29
titude to contemporary art—for those who even in the Soviet times	30
managed to find the boldest and most extraordinary creative deci-	31
sions. Their spiritual and plastic quests have always taken unusual	32
routs and they are the least prone to the influences of the olden times	33
or someone else’s ideas and notions.	34
The technology of colonization of people’s minds has remained	35
the same as a legacy of the previous colonial system, but today we	36
are speaking of the internal self-colonization as a result of the lack-	37
ing decolonization processes. Up to now the majority of the citizens	38

1 considers Uzbekistan a remaining part of the former Soviet Union, a
2 “USSR reserve.” Partly such a reflection is linked to the fact that most
3 of the people who live in Uzbekistan lack any national identity.

4 The mixture of the Soviet and the post-Soviet combined with the
5 lack of any creative and intelligent specialists from any area (from
6 cultural studies to sociology, history, art, literature and up to the ideo-
7 logues and political scientists) at the service of power, falsifications of
8 history through a forceful erasing of the collective memory—all this
9 has generated a provincial and distorted understanding of national
10 culture, and as a result—a cultural decline. In the end the people and
11 the country are offered a simulacrum of culture and art, a semblance
12 of poorly masked primitive wild capitalism, a group in power who is
13 far from people’s interests, a noncompetitive economy, and the hastily
14 masked social problems which can easily turn into political.

15 In these conditions no breakthrough to a higher social, political
16 or cultural level is possible. Neither is it possible to work for the
17 creation of a system of aesthetic notions answering the present con-
18 ditions and national features. We need intellectuals whose deficit
19 have already become customary, and we need a will of the ruling
20 elite. Every person’s contribution is important if this person is able to
21 create a globally competitive product, thus attracting the attention
22 to the history, culture and the problems of our country [Uzbekistan].
23 The more such people emerge (scholars, cultural activists, artists,
24 specialists of the highest rank in different spheres of human activ-
25 ity), the more chances there would be to take the country out of its
26 stagnation. Such individuals have discovered an open and flexible
27 system of aesthetic notions which can function in the conditions of
28 escaping the discipline of power structures in the detached and free
29 border space. As a result something new can emerge in the end.

30
31 TLOSTANOVA: In a number of your texts you mention the original
32 and independent style of “Socialist modernism” that started to be
33 shaped in the end of the Soviet period, yet, due to the well-known
34 historical events, was later wrapped up and sadly replaced with neo-
35 colonial mimicking styles and repetitions of someone else’s ideas. Can
36 a new and original style emerge today similar to Socialist modernism
37 and if yes, what would be its main strategies, techniques and nodal
38 points? Or all the points of nonreturn are already passed and con-

temporary art from the ex-Soviet countries is indeed doomed? Your own work has successfully testified the opposite demonstrating that Uzbekistan does have contemporary art. Which artists do you find the most representative of the post-Soviet human condition?

AKHUNOV: for the original style or a new artistic trend to emerge, a border situation is necessary when the old cannot exist anymore and the wind of change is breaking into the entrance door. Of course the old should be able to help develop the new. As I said earlier, today the main concern is representation and not innovation due to a complete exhaustion of the form-building process. In the absence of such process, it is impossible for the new phenomena to emerge. Hence, no fundamentally new subjective idea which needs a new subjective form for its realization is possible. The old art system is completely exhausted and there are no premises yet for the emergence of the new one. We must remember that artists have nothing left but to find courage in themselves to claim their rights to a subjective view of the world, to an “object,” to a hope that their “object” will come back. Unfortunately, contemporary art of the ex-Soviet countries is doomed to stay at the end of the list because today contemporary Western artists are backed up by the new and powerful technologies, a developed infrastructure of culture and art, and substantial financial investments.

The nodal points would remain the same—the anthropological points, the human being and human agency. The strategies would vary. The heroes would be both individual and collective. It is hard for me to define who the most important artists are for the understanding of the post-Soviet human condition. I rather prefer the intellectual curators who are able to identify the social and political sores and choose from a mass of projects, the most topical artistic works that discuss the urgent problems of society, in order to bring them tactfully together into a large multimedia orchestra and represent this multimedia symphony to the audiences. Viktor Misiano is one of them.

As for the neocolonial mimicking styles and repetition of someone else’s ideas, the contemporary art movement in Central Asia, which receives enough Western grants, definitely looks derivative and second-rate if not third-rate in comparison with Western art. It is its pseudo-copy. But no one seems to be preoccupied with this. The new heroes of contemporary art first attempted to exploit the

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1 ethnographic effect—their national features sprinkled with stereo-
2 typical depictions of the post-Soviet social life. This dish was served
3 to the Western audience as a substitute for real action. But a new time
4 has come and demanded to discard this ersatz and copying, for the
5 sake of real art, thus proving the poor judgment of Central Asian
6 contemporary artists who hastily mended their worn-out orien-
7 tal clothes to make them look more like Western fashions. Ridicu-
8 lous rags a lá dervish, supposedly liberated cynical nomadism, low
9 taste buffoonery—allowed the capricious and slippery West to look
10 at Central Asian contemporary artists with sarcasm as if they were
11 some curious mimicking creatures speaking an incoherent language,
12 and thoughtlessly imitating someone else’s gestures.

13 The arbitrary appropriation of aesthetic practices and elements of
14 language—not only intensified the problem of identity (without an
15 identity rooted in the native culture one cannot hope find any interest
16 or understanding in the world) but also exposed the neocolonialist
17 politics—the ubiquitous Western cultural expansion. It is not really
18 clear what is better—the Uzbek pragmatic apathy or the post-Soviet
19 Asian third-rate pseudo-copies and an urge to prove one’s otherness by
20 any means, for instance, by appropriating someone else’s experience
21 in the hope of being accepted. The artist has been taken to the level
22 of expandable material and the third-rate imitating époque has stimu-
23 lated a new artistic system. It continues to represent itself as socially
24 concerned art, but in reality an active export of postmodernist copies
25 has long become an indicative feature of cultural neocolonialism.

26 Now let me say a few words on the Socialist modernism. In the 1970s
27 a number of critically minded artists decided to destroy the habitual
28 order and combine the communist ideological artistic paradigm with
29 the modernist creation of new forms that is to synthesize the Socialist
30 realism and the modernist discourse. It was a bold attempt to create an
31 artistic trend of Socialist modernism as a combination of the aestheti-
32 cally politicized Soviet and Western art and thus pull the canonized
33 and exhausted Socialist realism out of its stagnation. It was necessary
34 to create a new avant-garde reality in new artistic gestures, languages
35 and forms. The question arose: what methods, forms and meanings
36 were to be used to deideologize the Soviet art? Gradually out of smaller
37 movements the general concept of Socialist modernism started to
38 emerge. The name itself was uneasy: “Socialist” did not go together



FIG. 4.2
Vyacheslav
Akhunov, *ABC*
(*The Alphabet of
Totalitarianism*)
(There is no higher
honor in the Soviet
Union than to
receive an approval
from Stalin). 1976.
Paper, watercolor,
61 cm × 39 cm.
Courtesy of the
artist.

with “modernism” very well. But it was enough to remember Kazimir Malevich’s work *The Red Horsemen* or [Vladimir] Tatlin’s *Tower* as the premises for the emergence of the socialist modernism. Undoubtedly it was all about deideologization (deconceptualization) of everything that was considered in the USSR to be sacred, untouchable, pertaining to the party and the ruling ideology. It became necessary to reform the very nature of Socialist realism and its practices, to work for the emergence in the Soviet art of a new type of artistic experience and thinking.

Back in the ’70s, I imagined socialist modernism as an overcoming of the Soviet ideological limitations in art. I saw it as a trend which borrowed the Western artistic languages and techniques in combination with socialist realism. Socialist modernism could adopt what was created by the socialist realists, but changes the accents

1 and the ideological contexts, removing the basis of the communist
2 ideology. I assumed that the artistic language of socialist modern-
3 ism would be shaped through commentaries, analytical judgments,
4 paradoxical statements, interpretations, and critical views of both
5 the socialist realist method and the modernist art movements. So-
6 cialist modernism could be a reconsideration of all the established
7 norms of socialist realism. It was a reaction to the present situation
8 in socialist realism and modernism, in both of which there was no
9 space for any innovation—everything that could be said had been
10 already expressed and archived. Socialist modernism was to erode
11 the boundaries between the hostile ideologies of the two struggling
12 political and economic systems, each with its own artistic territories
13 and languages. Socialist modernism, then could become the final
14 stage in the development of socialist realism in the form of its nega-
15 tion and a possibility for the continuation of the history of Soviet art.

16 TLOSTANOVA: What is in your opinion the role of contemporary art
17 in building the civil society in the post-Soviet repressive regimes?
18 When any adequate opposition to power is lacking, when the social
19 theoretical models tend to be weak and borrowed from someone
20 else's sources (as coloniality of thinking infects social theorists much
21 more than artists), can an artist or some creative activist community
22 play any visible political role and produce any meanings and affects
23 emancipating our consciousness? Could they perhaps use the fact
24 that any artistic utterance is metaphorical by definition and hence is
25 able to quickly and more accurately grasp the *Zeitgeist*, the change
26 of the imaginary, and is still able to escape from censorship? In what
27 forms can art more effectively exist today as a political utterance?
28

29 AKHUNOV: If we look at the emergence of contemporary art in Uz-
30 bekistan and wider, in the post-Soviet Central Asia, we would have to
31 admit that it is almost nonexistent. The first Uzbek exhibition of con-
32 temporary art opened in 2005. It was called Constellation and orga-
33 nized with the financial support of the Swiss Bureau for the Collabora-
34 tion in Culture and Art. The exhibition was closed three days after
35 the opening. The same year they closed the public nongovernmental
36 Center for the New Art that I officially founded two years before. In
37 2010 the group of young Uzbek artists who were my pupils and used to
38 regularly come to my workshop, were called to their respective bosses

and warned by the unknown people that Akhunov is an American spy and if they were to be seen again next to me they would lose their job and would never find another one. They had to make their choice.

On my initiative a group of young, enthusiastic students conducted a poll at the Uzbek National Art Institute. The future artists and the young graduates of the same institute between eighteen and twenty five years of age were asked what part was played by the contemporary art in the life of our country and if it could act as a catalyst, contributing to the development of the post-Soviet Uzbek society. The results of this poll were published in the book *Winter: Poetics and Politics* (Vishmidt et al 2013), which was a part of the Central Asian pavilion project at the 55th Venice Biennale. The answers were predictable, yet still quite shocking.

1. Art is:
 - (a) Art for art's sake—a creative experiment and a discovery of the new artistic forms.
50%—yes, 50%—no
 - (b) A commercial endeavor whose goal is to sell the artistic product.
80%—yes, 20%—no
 - (c) A social-political movement with the artist as an activist whose goal is revolutionary changes and overcoming of social alienation.
10%—yes, 90%—no
2. Does the contemporary art of Uzbekistan meet your expectations?
10%—yes, 90%—no
3. Have you ever encountered at exhibitions works by Uzbek artists that reflect social and political themes?
100%—no
4. Is it necessary to introduce the history of modernism into art college curricula?
40%—yes, 60%—no
5. Should teachers at art schools and colleges warn their students against any penchant for contemporary art, thus causing them to have negative opinions of this art?
50%—yes, 50%—no

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1 6. Does Uzbek art need private galleries independent from the
2 state?

3 40%—yes, 60%—no

4
5 At the same time, the state holds the International Biennial of Con-
6 temporary Art in Tashkent. Yet we have no private, independent or
7 state galleries which would specialize in the representation and pro-
8 motion of contemporary art and would be interested in the training of
9 specialists in this area. The local organizers of the large projects often
10 have no idea of the processes taking place in contemporary art which
11 means that there are still no premises for organizing any large events
12 such as international artistic forums. All of the previous biennials of
13 contemporary art in Tashkent had been just a formality as the regime
14 appointed its art bureaucrats to the key positions and they acted as cen-
15 sors immediately banning all critical works. It is not even the question
16 of wasting the state budget, but more the unbelievable unprofessional-
17 ism and lack of adequate specialists in the area of large international art
18 projects and most importantly, the total ideological control of the state.

19 The bureaucrats do not care why there is no dialogue between our
20 local artists and the latest trends in contemporary art worldwide, or
21 how one looks for new artistic languages. Due to the curators' low
22 professionalism, any communication turns to be a mere semblance
23 and, as a result, a failure. There are no curatorial strategies; the cura-
24 tors are not able to clearly formulate any original ideas. It would be in-
25 teresting to create each time a new exhibition structure and elaborate
26 a new tactic, making it possible to improvise and overcome the nar-
27 row disciplinary barriers and take into account the historical and cul-
28 tural conditions of our country. The local would-be curators are only
29 schematically copying illustrations from the catalogues, journals and
30 internet sites of the existing international forums to which they have
31 never been invited and hence could not possibly gain any first-hand
32 experience. In the end the imitation of knowledge and experience
33 leads to a parody instead of a wholesome and successful major Cen-
34 tral Asian international art forum. The lack of professionalism on
35 the curators' part does not bother the bureaucrats who take the final
36 decision on the organization of such projects. They do not care if it
37 were a real art event or a low quality simulation. What they do care
38 about is that under their wise supervision one more contemporary art

forum took place, the prizes were quietly and eventlessly awarded, the guests were massively *chapanized* and taken sightseeing in Samarkand,² the organizers praised themselves in the local media and now can safely report to their bosses that it was a successful event.

Often artists complain about persecutions of any independent initiatives by the authorities who fear the artists' unorthodox interpretations opposed to the official legitimized line in art and in politics. Yet, paradoxically, these artists almost never attempt to do an independent work. They complain about financial difficulties, bans and consequently, their worry of being left with no sustenance, their fear for their own and their family's lives and well-being. Such arguments are grounded in fear—a fear of being repressed! At the same time these same people are ready to be commissioned to do the poorly paid ideological state works risking to be mocked by censors, artistic unions and bureaucrats.

It means that after gaining independence the country still recreates the same politics of violence and suppression which Moscow successfully used in relation to its colonial peripheries. But today it is the local political elite which uses the same methods of colonial violence against any efforts at liberalization of our society. Let us call it an internal colonization. The authoritarian power is a pack of internal colonizers who are profiting from the peoples' ignorance and especially their ignorance of liberal values. Consequently, all the efforts to legitimize the real contemporary art are always nipped in the bud. Historically Tashkent has never had any underground or other forms of protest art such as mobile artistic communities, and anyone involved in art sphere is scared to death to be persecuted by the state.

As for creative forms of contemporary art as a political utterance, I would assume that any forms would do if interesting and creative ideas are put in their basis, if they use an unusual optic and develop unconventional interpretations. Yet the most effective, topical and adamant of all genres for me are performance, actionism, happening, which include the whole specter of multidisciplinary actions (music, fiction, poetry, theater, cinema, video, dance, declamation, etcetera), in short, the art of action.

TLOSTANOVA: Your artwork has long been known and appreciated in the world. Your works are exhibited in the West and in the East

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1 at the most prestigious professional forums. And this is wonderful
2 that you are appreciated even if sometimes you cannot even attend
3 your own exhibitions because you are not granted an exit visa from
4 Uzbekistan. Yet a number of artists from the post-Soviet space and
5 particularly those from the Caucasus and Central Asia experience
6 some Orientalist déjà vue, which is expressed in the exoticization
7 and commercialization of their art and of themselves as some neo-
8 colonial goods in the context of contemporary global art. Do you feel
9 these negative sides of the global recognition? Or you have your own
10 recipe of how to avoid it?

11 AKHUNOV: The ‘Socialist’ was crossed out from the formula “Social-
12 ist in its content, national in its form” and “capitalist” was put instead.
13 It is not only art products, but also purely commercial goods that are
14 often represented in national exotic garbs as playing the Orient. There
15 is a simple goal behind it—to identify ourselves in the midst of medio-
16 cre art products as being different and therefore, to attract attention
17 to what we are doing and to sell our works. It is no longer an appro-
18 priation or a repetition as such, but rather an exotic national wrap into
19 which the replications of Western works are often packaged. Usually it
20 is stressed that we are able to make everything just like the Westerners
21 do. Often when the Western grants stop to be poured into the post-
22 Soviet republics, the artists’ initiative also dries out, and it becomes
23 impossible to find anyone working in contemporary art, as it happened
24 in Kazakhstan. International art forums, which for a long time have
25 acted as centers and targets of art-nomadism and as a part of the global
26 tourist business, let the world discover the unknown exotic varieties of
27 contemporary art from the third world countries.

28 In 2007 in London I conducted a number of actions around the
29 question of why the artists from the third world are confined to
30 the role of props or exotic exhibits which must serve as a garnish
31 to the programs created by the artists from the developed countries. I
32 was cleaning with a toothbrush and shampoo, the tiles of the yard of
33 the Royal Academy of Arts and the work of German artist Kifferexhib-
34 ited in that yard, the columns and stairs of the National Art Museum
35 and the lions at the Trafalgar Square, the metal details and the décor
36 of the royal palace, the stairs of the old and new Tate Gallery buildings,
37 and even the stuffed animals at private apartments (*Cleaner*, 2007).
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The feeling of being fastened to this or that exhibition as an exotic object was persisting until the Istanbul biennial of the 2009 where they exhibited seven of my projects consisting of over eighty works. Only the dead artists are usually honored that way. After Istanbul there was a number of serious exhibitions, several museums bought my works and as a result, I was invited to take part in the famous Documenta 13 in Kassel, in exhibitions at the New Museum in New York, in the Pompidou Centre in Paris and at the Queen Sofia Museum in Madrid.

But why is it so? The reason for my recognition is that I work with the Soviet identity in continuation of my series from the nineteen seventies and within socialist modernism that we discussed earlier. This refers to the *Red Mantras of the USSR*, *The Red Party Line*, to my *Leniniana*, the *Art-Cheology of the USSR*, to the *Doubt*, *Procrustean Bed of Marxism-Leninism* and a dozen others. The artistic foundations were laid in the legendary times. Still, I had to prove my professional suitability anew by means of my contemporary projects.

Today I can choose my projects according to the “under doubt” principle. To put something under doubt means to discuss the alarming sense of historical repetition and insularity, the historical vacuum marked by a lack of events, by stagnation, and also, to reflect on my own works, my own feelings that I put under doubt. In the conditions of exhausted forms which have led to the impossibility of re-inscribing the signs (as new forms), the very doubt as a medium of all other mediums is doubted. Maybe this is my recipe to avoid the negative sides of the global recognition: to put everything which used to happen and which is going on now, and first of all, to put myself and my existence, under scrutiny. To doubt everything I do. My personal exhibition, which is now in the making will be curated by Viktor Misiano (who will also write one of the catalogue texts along with Boris Groys) and will be called “Under Doubt.”³

TLOSTANOVA: A quarter of a century has passed after the collapse of the USSR and there is an opinion that the Soviet legacy is already over and it is time to museumize it even for those of us who were shaped within its tight embrace and often in spite of it. On the other hand, the lacking self-reflection, the missing repentance or any work with cultural and historical complexes, traumas and memories, leads to a never ending wandering in circles, to falling over into the same

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FIG. 4.3 Vyacheslav Akhunov, *You Are Following the Correct Road, Comrades* (Lenin's plan of monumental propaganda). 1982. Paper, serial print, pencil, 40 cm × 29.5 cm. From the *Desert of Oblivion* series. Courtesy of the artist.

trap again and again, to a revival of the most dangerous imperial/Soviet *ressentiment*, for instance, in Russia. How has the trajectory of your own artistic priorities, interests, and leitmotifs changed in the last twenty five years? What have you lost and gained as an artist? What do you find important today and tomorrow?

AKHUNOV: Igor Savitsky acquired forty five of my works—two canvases and some graphics, for his famous collection in Nukus⁴. This happened in the fall of 1980 about a year after I graduated from the Surikov State Academic Institute. In 1977 the Tretyakov gallery bought four of my canvases for its collection. In 1989 after my trip to the United States and visits of many contemporary art museums, I told myself: “Everything has been already discovered, everything has been done before me.” I had not realized then that I was doing something important, unique and unlike anyone else, that somehow I managed to rethink the modernist discourse and formulate my own understanding of what I was doing and what other nonconformist artists in the USSR were also doing then—socialist modernism. For me, the struggle with the regime was taking a playful form. I did it with the

help of art, but it was a dangerous and even deadly game, I was interrogated by the KGB and my life was under constant surveillance.	1
After <i>perestroika</i> , when the bans were lifted and the empire collapsed I lost any interest in the game and in 1990 I packed all my works into boxes and suitcases and shelved them for twenty years.	2
Instead of that I started working in the cinema and attempted to learn how to make video art. I worked with film director Ali Khamrayev on the films <i>Tamerlane</i> and <i>Chenghis Khan</i> at an Italian cinema company, I visited Cinecittà Studios in Rome, Mosfilm, Sverdlovsk Cinema Company. I spent some time in Germany, England, and other places in Europe—in short, I was learning and working. My first three video art works were demonstrated publicly at the Tashkent exhibition <i>Constellation</i> in 2005. But before that there were several unofficial apartment screenings and experiments, efforts to assemble the video materials with the use of two video recorders, conceptual drawing series, inspired by the 1970s–80s works of Nam June Paik. Simultaneously, I started writing fiction texts more consistently than before. I worked on scripts, novels, and even poems. I have written two novels— <i>The Foundling</i> and the <i>Uzbek Transit</i> about the life of guest workers. Generally, I was engaged in things that had nothing to do with paints, varnish and thinners until I heard of contemporary art movements in Kazakhstan and Kirghizia. In the late 1990s I realized that the Uzbek society was in a worse situation than in the USSR and my interest in the game whose rules were becoming stricter every year, was revived.	3
In 2000 I was invited to take part in the first Central Asian festival of contemporary art in Almaty, but I have participated in contemporary art forums in the Soviet years as well. For instance, I took part in the Asian Art Biennale Bangladesh in 1987, where I won a prize. In Almaty together with the felt artist Burbukan Borubayeva (Bishkek), we made a sixteen meter installation based on my design. It was made of felt, sand and clay and called <i>The Desert of Oblivion. Quicksand</i> . The work was awarded a grand prix at the festival, and this is how I came back to contemporary art.	4
To share my experience with younger artists I initiated an officially registered nongovernmental Center for the New Art. Visual-plastic anthropology. In two years the National Security Service closed it as a hostile to the state line in the arts.	5
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1 The 1970s–80s me were a period of total isolation, mostly under-
2 ground, hermetic, with a theoretical bent. There were simply no non-
3 conformist artists, writers or film directors in Central Asia. The sec-
4 ond period starting from the late 1990s and until now can be defined
5 as an implementation of my theoretical ideas into practice. I mean
6 my theoretical experience of a multimedia artist of the eighties that I
7 managed to transfer in the nineties into the practical sphere, when I
8 had a chance to make installations, video art, performances, actions,
9 sculptures, and photo-projects, focusing on the social and political
10 problems and actively criticizing the regime. In a way, I was the pio-
11 neer of multimedia art in Central Asia and Uzbekistan. Besides, in the
12 local art situation, I was the founder and popularizer of contemporary
13 art and it is first of all as an artist that I managed to gain at least some
14 personal freedom in this deadening totalitarian state. When the cura-
15 tors of the Istanbul Biennial of Contemporary Art came to Tashkent
16 in 2009, my suitcases were reopened and the archives were finally
17 shown. Immediately after that I was invited to display my works in
18 Berlin, in Tanas gallery and at the Istanbul Biennial where my success
19 was celebrated by the exiled Uzbek political opposition presided by
20 Muhammad Salikh.⁵ After that encounter I was always rejected the
21 exit visas whenever I applied for one. I have become a hostage.

22 Today, tomorrow as well as yesterday it has been always important
23 for me to remain in the interstice. On the one hand, it allows seeing
24 the pragmatics of the demonized technological process of the attrac-
25 tion art époque which is oriented toward the consumers' mass tastes
26 when technologies usurp the space of the transcendental subject and
27 the human being is replaced with its technological double. Then a
28 realistic depiction (let us say of a flower) is mingling and hybridiz-
29 ing with a computer interface, a multimedia frame, or a technologi-
30 cal process. On the other hand, we deal with the all-encompassing
31 representation of the nonaccountable appropriation and the simula-
32 tive devices of the distorted representation of reality borrowed from
33 mass-media, the domination of simulacra, the advertising commer-
34 cial tricks and the political engagement of art. In the narrow inter-
35 stance between these two extremes the social and political art and the
36 topical culture exist. And the interstice lets in only the initiated ones.
37 For others the place is at the extremes.

CHAPTER FIVE

Reflecting on Time, Space, and Memory with Afanassy Mamedov

Afanassy Mamedov is one of the very few Russophone writers who fully embody the postcolonial and the postsocialist human condition. The intersection of postcolonialism and postsocialism has not yet received any serious critical reflection in Russia and is not even admitted to be a legitimate topic of discourse by the majority of the critical establishment. They often assume that both postcolonial and postsocialist studies are imported and imposed from abroad. . Mamedov has Azeri and Jewish roots. Born in Baku, the capital of Soviet Azerbaijan, Mamedov moved to Moscow as a young man; as a successful journalist and winner of many Russian literary prizes, as well as an editor of the Jewish journal *L'chaim*, Mamedov is one of the very few people writing in contemporary Russian language prose which is attuned to the global tendencies of transculturation, cultural and linguistic creolization, playful negotiation of the global and the local, trickster-shifting identifications, and nostalgic spatial memories of non-Russian post-Soviet multicultural cities. What follows is an excerpt from a longer interview I conducted with Mamedov on the nature of

1 fiction and on the post-Soviet unhomed writers who infinitely linger be-
2 tween various worlds and times.

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4 MADINA TLOSTANOVA: I first got acquainted with your work in 2000.
5 And since then for me the most interesting aspect of your fiction has
6 been the embodiment of transcultural space in your texts, how it on
7 the one hand, expresses the picturesque and palpable materiality of
8 this world and on the other, acts as a reservoir of many histories.
9 In my view, space in your works, often takes over time, space con-
10 quers time. Similar things happen in the famous Southern novel in
11 the United States (Faulkner and Carson McCullers among others), as
12 well as in a number of postcolonial works, such as Salman Rushdie's
13 and V. S. Naipaul's. But you have your own always recognizable way
14 of representing spatial histories. How would you define the sense of
15 place in fiction in general and in your own works? Does the recipe of
16 spatial-temporal correlation and interaction change from one work
17 to another?

18 AFANASSY MAMEDOV: Yes and no. The basis/carcass remains the
19 same or almost the same. It all depends on how much you change
20 yourself. Alexander Blok said that the author's style is a constant, in-
21 variable dimension because in order to change his style the author
22 himself would have to alter completely. Otherwise, it is not a style
23 but just a simulation. I have trusted Blok for many years, yet today
24 I am almost sure that any author can change beyond recognition two
25 or three times in his life. And the "sense of place," the "played out
26 past" together with the "open space" of the future, play an important
27 role in this uncontrollable process.

28 The sense of place depends on preferences, on what are we
29 dreaming about and how deep was our sleep when we woke up . . .
30 No matter how we cut our routes, no matter how we hurry up or
31 slow down, we always arrive at the same time and at the same point
32 with all our characters. They are also, by the way, subject to changes,
33 provided that their emergence in our text was determined not only
34 by the main story line but also by the suggestiveness of the text.

35 You know, it often seems to us that we, the writers, are smarter
36 than the text, written and published, but it is not always so. It often
37 happens that the resulting text turns out to be much cleverer, much
38 more significant and wonderful than its authors, and this paradoxical

divergence may last for years. It refers particularly to those writers who create their texts in the conditions of partial or complete liberation from the moment of cognition, to use a Zen-Buddhist metaphor. I think that my characteristic style is connected not as much with the quest for such a style or its conscious building (I am always catching up with my own texts), as with my place of birth—Baku, Second Parallel Street 20/67, apartment 37, and with my date of birth—1960, the time of the thaw, and with the family—a Jewish Azeri family, with its own multilayered history. . . .

I am not the first scriptor/writer in this family. A partiality to writing sat deeply in our genes, but also the karmic debt of my grandfather and father and other writing relatives that I inherited. All of this was not defining until the moment when I defined myself. My choice depended on many things, including the endless series of hobbies. They shaped me as a person of the Abrahamic triangle with some Zen elements.

It is easier for me to answer your question if I tell you about my literary preferences. When I was young in contrast with my peers who were keen on fantasy, mystery stories, historical and adventure novels I read a lot of “boring” Russian classical literature. And from very early on looked at the Caucasus, where I was born and grew up with the eyes of a “colonist,” “someone who arrived from elsewhere.” Ideally, this look was from above, except for the fact that it was fake, it was a mask. And this prevented me from properly taking off. Later the mask became my second nature and I started to finally climb, but that happened already in Moscow.

TLOSTANOVA: When did you move to Moscow? What were the reasons for your departure?

MAMEDOV: I left for Moscow in 1985 for many reasons, most of which can be described as personal. But then it seemed to me that I simply outgrew my city. I was protecting myself from the miseries of life with the help of the symbolists and the Russian Silver age literature. I was saving myself with Nabokov’s and Gazdanov’s prose. In the Russian literature divided after the October revolt I definitely preferred the immigrant part. It was so full of tension, drama, apocalyptic experience which none of the other national literatures can offer, in my view. The Literary Institute¹ also played an important part in shaping

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1 me as an individual and as an artist. The 1990s were not just the years
2 of freedom; we tested our strength with this freedom.

3
4 TLOSTANOVA: Twentieth-century writers from countries and re-
5 gions which went through the traumatic experience of wars, genocide,
6 exile, colonization, dictatorship, totalitarian regimes, have developed
7 in response particular recurrent and recognizable aesthetic and po-
8 etological forms, genres, and devices. This is how emerged the Eastern
9 European protest fiction, the German tradition of reckoning with the
10 past after World War II, the post-dictatorship fiction in a number of
11 Latin American countries and certainly the postcolonial novel as an
12 international phenomenon. Yet it seems that the postsocialist space
13 has not managed in the last twenty five years (since the collapse of
14 the USSR) to come up with its own model or even realize its own dif-
15 ference in poetics, in the set of devices, and the optics for seeing the
16 world. It does not mean of course that all of these elements do not
17 exist. It is just that they exist in some not entirely reflected upon, not
18 fully realized form. And part of the reason, as I see it, is the unwilling-
19 ness of the rest of the world and its aesthetic establishment to admit
20 the presence of such a distinct post-Soviet model of fiction and art.
21 The only works that have found a mass recognition in the rest of the
22 world are the straightforward political illustrations and commercial-
23 ized nostalgia. Is there such a thing as thpost-Soviet fiction, in your
24 opinion, as a separate school, modality or genre? Does it have a future
25 or it is going to disappear or become something else very soon?

26 MAMEDOV: Post-Soviet fiction definitely does not exist as a school
27 or as a trend. I agree with you here. As a modality, it does not exist
28 either it seems. We used to be a country of fresh newspapers, and
29 now we are a country of fresh books. Our literature is most probably
30 a literature of islands in the sea, which does not make it less valu-
31 able by the way. Why is it so? I think there are no leaders left in this
32 fiction. No irrefutable leaders. And those who used to be or are as-
33 signed to be leaders, usually from above, and by those publishers who
34 publish these writers “a novel a year”.. These are big publishers who
35 are certain that the trouble-proof functioning of their business can
36 indeed influence the literary processes, because for the bosses con-
37 temporary literature is a process and a quite controllable process at
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that (business, nothing personal). But they forget one Taoist truth:	1
“Things often grow when someone is trying to diminish them and	2
shrink when someone attempts to exalt them.” This works for people	3
as well. Another important thing is how our selected intelligentsia be-	4
haved after 1991. What the KGB has not managed to do was done by	5
the ordinary snickers bar . . . In short, the writers swallowed the bait	6
of the Western material abundance . . .	7
It is possible that for the post-Soviet fiction to become a school	8
and a modality, as we would like it to happen, what is needed is a	9
cumbersome political event, some important milestone, a mark in the	10
history of our country. Maybe we are coming closer to such an event	11
now, I mean what is happening in the world and what position Rus-	12
sia has taken in relation to the West.	13
You ask if the post-Soviet fiction is going to dissolve with time. I do	14
not think so. We have no choice, we cannot juxtapose to it, so to say,	15
an unofficial post-Soviet literature, because in the last years we have	16
not managed to create such a counter-cultural phenomenon, there	17
was simply no need for it. No one was banned; everyone who wanted	18
to be heard—from here and from there—could be published. Can it	19
become different? When it happens the post-Soviet fiction will stop	20
being itself, which maybe both of us will celebrate. Because at the	21
moment when it happens, a real post-Soviet fiction would emerge in-	22
stead of a clumsy corporate product in the troubled minds of always	23
hurrying literary critics. And then it will be possible to study it and	24
find its leaders asking the question of who should be allowed in this	25
literature and who should be left out.	26
But I am really answering your question from the end, it would be	27
more appropriate to start from the fact that it is necessary to define	28
the temporal frames without which we will not understand what is	29
included into the concept of post-Soviet literature. It would be con-	30
venient to think that it starts after the collapse of the USSR, but I	31
think that the count should begin two-three years before. I would	32
offer 1989 as the starting date. And also I would not wait until this	33
fiction dies in agony and would sentence it to its end before. I believe	34
that it happened in 2003–2004. After that a different sort of fiction	35
emerges which you have just mentioned. But many people simply	36
did not notice its originating moment. This means that the temporal	37
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1 frame of the post-Soviet fiction has been just the past ten or twelve
2 years, and maybe even less.

3 Now when we have defined the temporal frames we should think
4 of what authors we could include—all those writing in Russian in
5 different parts of the world, or only Russian Federation, or the Com-
6 monwealth of Independent States? If we are stricter about the term
7 “post-Soviet,” then we should include only the authors who used to
8 live and write in the ex-Soviet space, but I would shun from this. In any
9 case this is none of my business to decide whom to let in and whom to
10 throw out, whom to call a general, and whom to bury in a mass grave as
11 a brave lance-corporal. This is the task of independent experts and they
12 are to decide. I feel somehow the imperfection of the concept “postso-
13 viet fiction” which used to be convenient up to a certain moment.

14 TLOSTANOVA: Many of your readers are attracted, even mesmerized,
15 with the images of Baku and Moscow, of many foreign towns and cit-
16 ies which you visited and whose spirit you are subtly recreating, for
17 example, in the fragmentary *Absheron Chronicles*—a book quite un-
18 conventional in the genre and narrative sense. In fiction space, and
19 especially urban space which is highly man-made, is entirely unreal,
20 utterly subjective; it capriciously changes under the influence of our
21 moods and our wishes, but also has its own will and nature. When a
22 writer comes into such a space and starts playing with topos (from
23 Greek τόπος—space as location), strange things happen. I could not
24 help feeling that your spatial portraits are not photographs, not docu-
25 ments, but rather paintings, so to say, that is a highly imagined topos
26 of Baku, Moscow, Istanbul, Germany, or the Maghreb. Gradually
27 from work to work there emerges a complex community of charac-
28 ters, families, friends migrating from one story or novel to another. It
29 is a certain saga not unlike Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha—with its own
30 carefully striated and lovingly mapped world, so deceptively real and
31 at the same time, imagined. What is the recipe of such an artistic real-
32 ity? How real or imagined is it? Or maybe similarly to Vladimir Nabokov,
33 you do not believe in reality without quotation marks and you add
34 into your texts only the very necessary modicum of such mediocre
35 reality in order to fool the reader who is looking for realism and plausi-
36 bility? Such a hapless reader will encounter in the pages of your books
37 the real streets, places, and names—Shemakhinka, Parallel streets,
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Seaside Boulevard, Tverskaya street with many side streets around the Patriarch Ponds in Moscow. But all of these are stylized spaces, the optics of their representation is recognizably yours and they are always marked with a spatial confusion, a phantasmagoric trace, an element of detachment and estrangement making the familiar look unpredictable. Already in your first works I was stricken by this hybridity, this overlapping of different spaces, this very specific depth. And now it seems that this element has intensified.

More and more often spaces become openly fantastic, mystical and esoteric as in a number of your recent works populated by trickster characters who are undergoing various metamorphoses. What sort of signs are those? Can we interpret them as an impossibility of finding a way out in this world? Or is it a peculiar version of the old Bakhtin's road chronotope which we find in the medieval romance and in the picaresque novel? In your case the road chronotope was first realized as nostalgia for Baku and the adventures of a stranger in Moscow. But now more and more often it is a path through the looking glass, into other realities, into the twilight esoteric worlds, into yoga and martial arts as a philosophy of life. Why such a shift?

MAMEDOV: I am glad you remembered the *Absheron Chronicles*. It is a border work; it sort of ends a long period in my life. It sums up the époque of *Frau Shram*. I was writing that novel in the state of being open to all winds and I did not care about anyone's opinion, but the *Absheron Chronicles* is a hermetic work even if it seems to be light and readable. Working on it, I always kept in mind what would people think of me. There are certain moments in life when your youth turns out to be wiser and brighter than "the age of wisdom." What made you ask about the esoteric and yoga worlds is probably the triptych "When fire keeps water" and especially its last novelette "Nargiz and Aramis." This work is in many ways a test, I had to see if I really can let the other reality into my/our world, if these two worlds can coexist in my prose, what language should I use in certain narrative moments, when both worlds are indistinguishable and one of them overlaps with the other . . . This triptych was the foothold for the short novel I am finishing now.² There are great masters of such prose from Kafka to Bulgakov; I needed to see if I can enter this literary territory, this literary regiment with my own face, what would

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1 be the losses, if any. I could have written such prose earlier, but I
 2 felt before that I have no right to do it and then, I very much nurtured
 3 a healthy man in myself, a man firmly standing with his feet on the
 4 ground and pretending that an “other reality” maybe exists, but is none
 5 of my care. But as soon as this ground slipped from under my feet I felt
 6 an urge to write differently, I got a feeling that I acquired that right.

7 My writing is connected with the road I once chose. This road as it
 8 turns out, is linked with Buddhism, but not with traditional varieties
 9 such as ashrams, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, or Tibetan and not even
 10 with the Buddhism processed by Albert Schweitzer or Teitaro Suzuki,
 11 but rather with that Eastern fairy tale which Westerners invented for
 12 themselves. First of all I mean Salinger’s and Hesse’s Buddhism. For
 13 them it was also a state of their soul, a longing for light, an immediate
 14 and inexpressible state which is necessary to fix to be able to come
 15 back to it and use it properly to save oneself. In this sense there is not
 16 much difference between the core Buddhism and the ashram. Maybe
 17 I am wrong, let us say, this is my feeling. I do not want to touch upon
 18 theoretical or technical aspects, such as, for example, what is a halt in a
 19 dialogue and how does it affect a soul prepared or not prepared by Bud-
 20 dhism. Let us agree that our Buddhism is the Buddhism of intellectuals
 21 and artists. You stepped out to the balcony to have a smoke and have
 22 a cup of tea and found yourself in a different century or millennium,
 23 or even in a different dimension, you understood something and got
 24 back with no losses and this is already good.

25 But if on top of that you carefully extinguished your cigarette and
 26 washed your cup without pushing anyone with your elbow or making
 27 their life difficult with your cigarette smoke, then you are a hero, then
 28 you understand what is Zen. The change of course was not induced
 29 by me. I would feel much more comfortable living the way I lived and
 30 writing the way I wrote before. But certain things happen independ-
 31 ently of our wishes, let us call them the twists of fate. They are such
 32 “Finnegan’s wakes.” Good if you can disappear, hide in some sabbati-
 33 cal. As a rule, there is no point in clinging to the past. You can only
 34 hope for some assistance from the outside . . .

35 As for the real and imagined in my prose, I invent only those things
 36 that—as Sergei Dovlatov would say—imbue the narrative reality with
 37 some degree of probability, everything else is redundant. So it is not
 38 really a question of composition or form . . . I offered a sacrifice if you

wish and now I am responsible for it in my writings, and the rest of it is not mine, I leave it to others with no regret. You said it very well and to the point when you mentioned reality in quotation marks. Someone else's experience is this reality in inverted commas; one can remove the commas only when it becomes one's own experience. Initiation is, in fact, removing the quotation marks from reality, and not just removing but also rocking this reality which may be dangerous at times. And maybe that is why one cannot be initiated at one's own will but only at the will of heaven, if you excuse my pathetic tone. Maybe this is why real literature has never heard of such bodies as the Ministry of Culture and does not know anything about such mind-widening books as *The 100 Best Contemporary Authors*.

TLOSTANOVA: You always create a second reality existing entirely in your mind and in your whimsical memory. And it is about memory that I would like to ask you. Literature as well as cinema is certainly the art of memory. But its role can be quite different. What is it in your case? Is it a conservation of the past, nostalgia for the childhood or an exorcism as an effort to get rid of the previous experience, including the Soviet one?

MAMEDOV: I think all of what you enumerated exists, but the question is which of them dominates. I feel that I am the least preoccupied with the liberation from the Soviet experience, if I understood you correctly, and you implied here a political alignment affecting our generation. You see, I have always been rather apolitical and now even more so—long live Fellini! And it will not be possible to divide the purely Soviet from the post-Soviet, well, maybe only the lemonade and caviar from the Sebastopol sparkling wine.

Indeed, I stopped conserving the past or being nostalgic about my childhood. Flesh-backs become less and less important in my writing. You are right, without the art of memory there is no art as such. The question is what do you want to remember as an artist and as an ordinary human being, how the former and the latter are positioned inside yourself. It would be wonderful to get rid of the previous experience, especially if it were negative, but one has to be very careful here because in the heat of liberation it is easy not to notice that you started to liberate yourself from yourself. Not everyone and not always is fit for Castaneda style cleanings. The human being is very

1 fragile, one cannot stop respecting oneself, or start refusing a mission
 2 one was assigned, generally, or in a concrete period of one's life—just
 3 because one is tired or sick with it and wants to jump over several
 4 steps in one's subconscious. . . . If God needs to set you free of some
 5 negative experience he would do it and it is not your task to decide
 6 when. All you can do is to pour out some water from the overflow-
 7 ing glass. I think when I am writing this is exactly what I am doing.
 8 Maybe this is the main reason . . .

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 10 TLOSTANOVA: The space we have been discussing so far is also a
 11 home, a certain anchor of the soul as Salman Rushdie once said. Yet
 12 when there is no real, stable home—and in today's world, there are
 13 more and more people who are in such an unhomed situation—it
 14 role can be performed by language. Let us talk a bit about the role of
 15 language/languages in your works. What is the specificity of language
 16 in contemporary Russophone literature written by multicultural au-
 17 thors from the postsoviet space? I feel that so far their works often
 18 fall out of the critics' tunnel vision or are distorted in accordance
 19 with some moth-eaten Soviet formulas of the national in its form
 20 and Socialist in its content (today it simply becomes just Russian in-
 21 stead of Soviet). It is much more convenient to label the author as
 22 a "singer" of his native Abkhazia who grew up feeding on the great
 23 Russian culture, even if he does not glorify his native land experienc-
 24 ing a complex love-hate relationship with it instead. It is easier to call
 25 a writer, for example, a "Russophone Kabardin author" (this is how I
 26 was called by one of the label-loving literary critics). But these labels
 27 are a fake. How would you define your works in this sense?

28 It seems that language is yet another touchstone in the process of
 29 the post-Soviet writers' entering the larger world of global fiction.
 30 There are almost no translations or it is a predictable set of figures
 31 representing Russian fiction abroad. Moreover, translations are often
 32 inadequate because multilingualism and multiculturalism are barely
 33 possible to translate. Literature in this sense is an inconvenient and
 34 almost archaic genre in today's rapidly visualizing world. It is not
 35 dancing, not painting, not installation or clownery. In literature
 36 words still rule. And this immediately problematizes any transla-
 37 tion between cultures, between the worlds of values even in the post
 38 Soviet space itself. Are your multilingualism and chorus narration

translatable from one Russian into another? What is your attitude to Russian language as a writer's tool?

MAMEDOV: Language as home?! It is an unexpected comparison . . . I would agree with you, if we add the adjective "ancestral." But then we would have to speak about those changes that took place in the last quarter of a century in the yard of our civilization. Today we will not find laundry drying on the clothesline, or cats sunbathing on the roof of the communal lavatory and the mechanical doorbells went out of fashion. Not only these, but many other things, comprise the idea of our ancestral home. I cannot tell you when and why these homes derailed, but I am certain that they were a crucial part of our postcaveman civilization.

Contemporary people have forgotten what their ancestral home is. In a sense this makes them cut off from their childhood, for our ancestral home is that very shell in which our material and spiritual bodies were carefully nurtured. It is not only the language we were going to use when communicating with others, but also the language which we learned to use when speaking with ourselves, the language of our metaphysical self or the language to which we entrust ourselves for the rest of our life. Your ancestral home is also your first library, the literal link with ancestors who lived and died in these walls, and the seven drafts and the first dreams and everything else without which literature and art would maybe survive but become mediocre and middlebrow. One can move to another continent, but when one knows that somewhere there is this ancestral home, one still lives and sees the world in a particular way. The book indeed stopped to play the role it used to play only recently. There is no home as a home and no library as a library anymore. The book is sent into a cloud storage or a memory-stick.

Our language could not help changing with the emergence of internet and social media . . . There is less and less need for the richness of language, while its development and mastering require too much time and effort. And it is not practical. Then it is better to master other languages. We need a second and third language to get more information and share it with our "friends," without experiencing any linguistic barrier while travelling, feeling ourselves protected. The language of contemporary literature consists of a number of linguistic clichés and formulas at best. I would call them the ribs of language.

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1 And it happens not because everyone has suddenly become ardent
2 adherents of linguistic norms and wants to report their work to phi-
3 lologists who would in their turn hasten to correct all the mistakes. It
4 is just that souls are more and more fading out. And this is the cradle
5 of all literary trash.

6 You are right that literature has become outdated in today's
7 quickly visualizing world. I think that cinema, painting, and plastic
8 arts have also been challenged, but in a less serious way. Yet they will
9 not escape this fate with time. Our eye is also an instrument, directly
10 linked with our intellect and soul . . . Simplification and flattening
11 refer to contemporary translations as well. People who speak fluent
12 English may easily not know who is Philip Sidney or Ben Johnson.
13 They may not know who John Donne is. But I am sure they will eas-
14 ily find their way to Heathrow airport. Important cultural codes and
15 keys are being lost . . . No matter how ingenious the translation is, it
16 cannot possibly recreate all the subtleties of the original, it can only
17 give us a bunch of keys. The rest depends on the reader.

18 Several times there were preparations to translate my prose into
19 German and Turkish. They say there are even some drafts of trans-
20 lations of my stories. I take it calmly. I am not sure at all that my
21 works could be translated at least on any acceptable level. For this to
22 happen, it is necessary that the translator knows Russian literature
23 and culture very well, as well as Russian colloquial and literary lan-
24 guage and, most importantly, is really keen on the author he is going
25 to translate. This is the minimum. And I am not sure that anyone
26 anywhere is so feverish about my prose . . . I do not need just some
27 translations. I can live without them.

28 I discovered my language by chance. Sometime in the late 1980s, I
29 was listening to Radio Freedom. In some cultural program they were
30 discussing a prize winning novel by a Corsican writer delivered in
31 non-normative French. The custodians of the purity of the French
32 language were enraged whereas the readers loved the book. Then I
33 understood the legitimacy of my Russian, not the one I was learning
34 at school, and not the one I am speaking in Moscow or am trying to
35 write in now, but the one which was spoken in Baku, by the whole
36 street or just the inhabitants of our yard, the Russian that was spo-
37 ken by the Bakinian Spring. And after this random discovery I wrote
38 "Weddings" and they then pulled all other works.

“Weddings” was the first short-story noticed by the critics. Inspired by the literary bureaucrats they attempted to send me to the division of national authors. This was probably easier and safer for them—the critics are dependent people after all. But I refused this offer and pretended that I did not hear it. And of course I found myself outside of the national mainstream. Judging by the fact that many years have passed since then and each of us was left with what we have and what we are, I think that such a state of affairs is convenient for both me and those who control our contemporary literature. But I would not like for my words to be interpreted as some accusation. Let us finish with a Latin saying *Suum cuique* [May all get their due]. May this overused Latin truth resonate once again. Especially that it refers to more than just literary affairs.

TLOSTANOVA: How do you see the future of Russia, and does it have a future at all?

MAMEDOV: Prophecy is a thankless task and can be even dangerous at times. First, prophecies are seldom accurate and almost always need to be later edited by the contemporaries. Second, it is a certain kind of programming—you attune people to a particular development of events. And a person should be free from anyone’s interference. People should see themselves in the future, realize their roles, and construct them according to their own principles and experience, and not those imposed by Kremlin ideologies. Russia probably does have a future, but it would hardly be similar to how a decent person imagines it. Human world lives according to Karmic laws and no one can change this. In other words, what goes around comes around. Everything returns to you. We are aware of what exactly have we planted since the USSR collapsed. I say “we” because it is a collective karma.

Russia is not a young country, even if many historians think so and impose their vision onto the society. They say that we still have time to correct ourselves, that we are still green and young. We are having fun. Russia is “having fun” with all the associated consequences.

Nikolay Berdyaev singled out five periods in Russian history: Kiev, Tatar, Moscow, Petersburg and Bolshevik. I believe that since 1991 we have lived in the sixth Russia. Evidently at some historical juncture we, our ancestors had worked out the fifth Russian karma, but not completely it seems because we never used this historical chance

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1 [to become a free and just society]. Today's époque of restoration and
 2 recoil is a proof. The sixth Russia had not even shaped itself properly
 3 yet when it already started to look back at the fifth period in its most
 4 unfortunate manifestations which are used as our templates today.
 5 Can we stop this process? I do not know. I only know that such pro-
 6 cesses are usually stopped at the cost of incredible sacrifices. Is it
 7 possible to avoid them? It probably is if the society and the power are
 8 both mature enough to induce and accept the changes . . . But in-
 9 stead we witness the opposite processes. In the best scenario it would
 10 bring a slow dying. And then the sixth Russia would turn out to be
 11 shorter than the fifth. How much shorter? It is better to pray for the
 12 country and for ourselves than tell fortunes.

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Why are ye silent? Cry, Long live the tsar Dimítry Ivánovich!
 (The People are silent.)
 —Alexander Pushkin, *Boris Godunov*

CONCLUSION

People Are Silent . . .

I started this book with a rather pessimistic analysis of the futureless ontology reigning in the vast spaces of external imperial difference and its multiple colonial otherness. The futureless ontology leaves us with no hope indeed, unless we delink from one of modernity's favorite deceptions—that of the necessarily happy future—and decide to perform instead a radical return to the past that, to quote Zapatistas through Rolando Vázquez (2015), disrupts the hegemony of modernity. In Amerindian tempo-local models, the past is in front of us rather than behind us. It is not frozen and dead, closed and museumized. It is a living and breathing temporality that we know, in contrast with the unknown future, and this awareness is radically affecting our lives, offering a well of alternatives and giving us strength to live in the present and build our future. Therefore, it is crucial to reflect first on our uses of the troubled pasts if we intend to have any future. And this is what the former and present empires and their aftermaths are reluctant to allow.

Yet the local communities and individuals must do crucial work on memory, on historical traumas and restless ghosts that continue to consume us

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1 and erase our future. In the context of external imperial difference and
 2 its multiple colonial difference it means to engage in a painstaking labor
 3 of critical self-reflection and cultivation of courage to admit our responsi-
 4 bility for the past and the future. This radical delinking from the dogmas
 5 of neoliberal, socialist, nationalist, and other modern/colonial discourses
 6 would have to be grounded in the acceptance of the right to difference
 7 as the foundational principle of relational ontology and ethics and in the
 8 shift from the will to power that seems once again to be winning over
 9 the “will to life” (Dussel 2008, 78) in the contemporary world as a neces-
 10 sary requirement for bringing the present “defuturing” tendencies to a halt.

11 Decolonization of collective and personal memory is an extremely dif-
 12 ficult task in which decolonial art, problematizing the official versions
 13 of history, can play a key role. It is a painful work asking for ruthless self-
 14 criticism. Paradoxically the colonized themselves often oppose this pro-
 15 cess. The surrogate of memory and the simulacrum of ethnic culture offered
 16 to the post-Soviet zombified nations, naturalize humiliation and cut off the
 17 ability to think critically.

18 Decolonizing memories and existence through art, entails a restoration
 19 of the artist’s and the audience’s agency—their right and ability to finally
 20 make their own choices and decide what to remember and how; to real-
 21 ize who we are and why were we brought into this world. Such decolonial
 22 creative acts inevitably address the spatial and corporeal memory and the
 23 memory of objects constantly traversing and problematizing the boundaries
 24 and leakages between human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate. The
 25 decolonial cathartic power of art then is realized through resisting and re-
 26 existing moves as forms of embodied memories, evoking the most primal
 27 affects—sonic, visual, olfactory, tactile, causing uncontrollable avalanches
 28 of previously censored remembrances that stubbornly reemerge.

29 Such decolonial work could potentially result in responsibility, indepen-
 30 dence, freedom, and maturity. And it should take place on different levels,
 31 including the level of intellectuals’ carefully analyzing and reflecting on
 32 decolonial social movements rather than imposing ready-made solutions
 33 and tailored models on them. However, social movements and political
 34 society at large in contemporary post-Soviet states—both postcolonial and
 35 postimperial—are notoriously weak, demoralized, and marginalized, if
 36 they exist at all. Are there any remaining channels for decolonial poten-
 37 tialities in the space of the external imperial difference and its multiple
 38 colonial differences then? Once again, art seems to be one of the very few



FIG. CONC.1 Egor Rogalev, *Situation No. 15*. Kiev, 2014. Archival photographic print in various editions; dimensions variable. From the photo series *Synchronicity*. Courtesy of the artist.

such channels. According to Caribbean writer Wilson Harris (1995, 378), in colonial spaces history is often buried in the art of imagination. It is only through allegories, symbols, and metaphors that we can tell an alternative narrative and not be killed or incarcerated. Yet, as discussed earlier, metaphorical expressions are also strangely more effective than bare facts because they call directly to our emotions and sensibilities thus launching a painful process of mental and existential liberation. And the first steps of this process are already visible in the works of many artists touched upon in this book.

Immanuel Kant (1996 [1684]) famously defined the Enlightenment as “man’s emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one’s own understanding without another’s guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one’s own mind without another’s guidance.” Kant’s definition is surprisingly fitting for the post-Soviet situation of voluntary self-colonization by various nationalist and imperial dogmas and myths keeping the population enchanted and therefore enslaved.

Reflecting on similar problems, but doing it from the underside of modernity, Frantz Fanon (1963, 316) doubted the ability of humanity to grow

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1 up and take responsibility for the world and for itself, yet he endorsed
2 the necessity for the people of the global South stop imitating Europe
3 and catching up with it, and start “inventing and making discoveries” to
4 “advance humanity a step further.” Yet Fanon’s call has largely remained a
5 dream; as he analyzed the psychoses and neuroses of victims and torturers
6 in the Algerian War of Independence, Fanon himself had to admit that it
7 was hardly possible for them to become free of violence. “Their future is
8 mortgaged,” he wrote (Fanon 1963, 22).

9 Is this also true of the external imperial difference then? Are we forever
10 marked by the apathy and inertia of the raped slave for whom the only escape
11 could be into a “phenomenological disappearance” (Yampolsky 1999), plac-
12 ing one between death and enslavement, and ultimately making us invis-
13 ible once again inside and outside the repressive system? One of the most
14 talented and relentless critics of the Russian paradigm of violence, the late
15 film director Aleksei German (2008), formulated this diagnosis even more
16 harshly: “We are a raped, a prison-bitched country, and we forgave and for-
17 got our humiliation and did not repent, did not ask for any retribution.”

18 The main decolonial task for the former Soviet spaces, then, is precisely
19 to overcome this persistent paradigm of violence, humiliation, and dispens-
20 ability of human lives, and to find the courage to realize the extent of our
21 bondage and start on the long and hard path away from fear and violence
22 back to ourselves. This would mean learning not only to resist but also, most
23 important, to re-exist. Russian human rights activist Yuri Kazakov (2004, 144)
24 called this phenomenon a gene of violence—or one can say an apologia of
25 violence—both from above and from the bottom, from the state and from the
26 political opposition. This model is endlessly reproduced in different politi-
27 cal forms, but its essence remains the same: the totality of violence cancels
28 the question of ethics in political actions. In Kazakov’s (2004, 144) words,
29 “Post-Soviet Russia [and a number of other post-Soviet countries] has not
30 become a country of mass repentance, the blame for its internal phlebotomy
31 has been always shifted in the mass consciousness to some ‘elites,’ at best
32 resolutely taking any personal responsibility off their shoulders. As a result,
33 in public opinion we have an explosive mixture of social (civil) dystrophy
34 and national and interethnic unrest, and finally, the all-penetrating sense
35 of injustice.” As long as this is true, de-imperialization, and hence decoloni-
36 zation, of thinking, being, and perception will never take place.

37 In the introduction, I touched on some of the reasons for the feebleness
38 of the Russian protests of 2011–13 and the subsequent channeling of their

energies by those in power. Indeed, small-scale social protests are doomed by definition because they avoid entering the political sphere. Likewise, the nonsystemic opposition has been consistently fragmented and unsuccessful in its exclusive focusing on politics and its refusal to deal with social and economic issues.¹ However, the shared protest against the fraudulent presidential election was not enough to make allies of the ultra-left and the ultra-right, of nationalist and neoliberal groups. It is symptomatic that none of the Russian “Occupies” has ever attempted to cooperate with each other or build coalitions afterwards.

In the closing months of 2016 when I was writing these words, almost three years after the strangling of the last protest wave, it has become clear that the wars in Ukraine and Syria could no longer help the Russian regime distract people’s attention from growing economic instability and social unrest. Parliamentary elections in September 2016 demonstrated the actual crisis of legitimacy and the real attitude of citizens toward those in power. The majority of Russians simply ignored the election, which had record low turnouts. People do not believe elections can be used as a factor of change, and they refuse to be part of the election farce as well. The remaining low percentage of those who voted was comprised of completely dependent people—pensioners, students, prison inmates, soldiers, employees of state organizations—who did not have even a minimal choice.

Oppositional political scientist Andrey Piontkovsky wrote on September 21, 2016 at Kasparov.ru oppositional internet portal:

Absence from the elections is a conscious form of expressing your attitude to power and its fake procedures. . . . It has become an international meme that Putin is supported by 86 percent of the population. . . . But what is support? It is a readiness to die for him at the barricades if someone attempts to displace him. Let us not require so much. There is a minimum degree of possible support—to show up at the election and vote for your leader’s party. If one is not capable of doing this what kind of adherent of Putin is he then? Voting is an indirect but rather accurate opinion poll. . . . The turnout was 36 percent, and the United Russia got 40 percent. This means that Putin’s real rating is 14 percent rather than 86 percent. (Piontkovsky 2016)

To me this change is an indication of another important phenomenon that is crucial for the emergence of decolonial drives in the space of external

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FIG. CONC.2 Egor Rogalev, *Situation No. 7*, Kiev, 2009. Archival photographic print in various editions; dimensions variable. From the photo series *Synchronicity*. Courtesy of the artist.

imperial difference. To put it simply, it is the phenomenon of silence as a political position, or even silence as a form of resistance and a promise of re-existence. South-African Nobel Prize laureate J.M. Coetzee in his post-colonial rereading of Daniel Defoe's famous novel fantasizes of Robinson Crusoe cutting off Friday's tongue for being arrogant and therefore dooming him forever to silence and inability to be born and become himself (Coetzee 1986). Yet it is also possible that Friday remains opaque of his own will and simply refuses to speak with Robinson. In the case of many post-Soviet/postcolonial groups, such a silence can be also a form of resistance and a first step in the direction of regaining their true sense of selfhood, their long-suffering human dignity that has always been a target of colonial and neocolonial rulers. The damage is not irreparable. For all of us who were, and sometimes still are, colonized by the Russian/Soviet/post-Soviet empires, the path, again, will be long and complex, and we are at the start. Yet there is hope of re-existence.

Silence understood as a way of resistance reverberates with Alexander Pushkin's controversial, Shakespearian historical drama <i>Boris Godunov</i> (1918 [1825]), which famously ends with the death of Tsar Boris; the rise to power of the so-called False Dmitry; and the beginning of the period of unrest after which the Romanov dynasty came to power. The closing line of the play has been a subject of many conflicting interpretations, from an essentialist proof of Russians' slavish nature to seeing silence as a tangible realization of anger and an elementary form of confrontation. After all, the people who have just learned of the assassination of the previous ruler's family by the new tsar, and who are invited to praise the False Dmitry, respond to this call with terrified silence rather than obedience. The question is, How much fear and how much resistance does this silence contain?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
In the present context of the post-Soviet silences I prefer to interpret this phenomenon as an intermediate position of neither-nor, of no more and not yet, from which a re-existence can still be born if some of the decolonial drives have a chance to evolve in the near future. Wendy Brown (1996, 197) refers to this intermediate state in an interesting way: "The historical-political place of silence for collective subjects emerging into history is this crossed one—a place of potentially pleasurable reprieve in newly acquired zones of freedom and privacy, yet a place of 'freedom from,' that is not yet freedom to make the world."	13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21
This disquieting yet promising note of silence is the first humble step toward future re-existence. This tendency once again is represented most graphically in post-Soviet art with the two examples from which I would like to wrap up this book. The first one represents the trajectory of the mainstream homogenizing actionist tradition, stemming from the space of the imperial difference and thus erasing many significant nuances. The second is an example of decolonial art, growing from the exteriority of colonial otherness and focusing on the nuances of difference and intersections of suppressions.	22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30
The first example is found in the works of the performance artist Pyotr Pavlensky, which are known and understood worldwide due to their poster-like actionist simplicity and straightforward message: the struggle with the regime's most recognizable features, such as censorship and shrinking freedom of speech and expression for artists, as well as other citizens. Such was his <i>Seam</i> (2012), in which Pavlensky stitched his own mouth shut with a coarse thread and stood for a long time in a picket line in front of Saint Petersburg's Kazan Cathedral to protest the incarceration of members of the	31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38

1 feminist punk band Pussy Riot. In his famous *Fixation* (2013), the naked
2 artist, in the best tradition of corporeal actionism, nailed his own scrotum
3 to Red Square to protest the apathy and fatality of contemporary Russian
4 society. Finally, in *Threat* (2015), Pavlensky, in an act of public arson, set
5 fire to the doors of the Lubyanka Building, headquarters of the КГБ. This
6 action resulted in a trial, and a disproportionately large fine was comically
7 imposed on him for damaging the historically valuable building in which
8 many prominent Russian cultural and societal figures were incarcerated
9 or tortured. Pavlensky's art is no doubt radical and political. But it is also
10 contained entirely within the realm of the immediate present and there-
11 fore is hardly decolonial. It falls instead into the paradigm of the futureless
12 ontology (Walker 2014).

13 Aslan Gaisumov's decolonial works are less straightforward and simpli-
14 fied. They are multi-semantic and open to different interpretations and
15 various temporalities, because they are not fixed in the actionist metaphys-
16 ics of the presence, but try instead to reflect on the multiple pasts, without
17 which there is no present or future. Gaisumov sees silence as an embryo of
18 suppressed but survived resistance. He also focuses on the radical return
19 in the form of placing the actual material archive of his denied past in a
20 European museum as a dual gesture of setting himself free from the trau-
21 mas of that past, yet at the same time, legitimating that past and making it
22 impossible to deny.

23 These were the two main themes of the latest works shown at Gaisu-
24 mov's personal exhibition at the Antwerp Museum of Contemporary Art in
25 the summer of 2016 ("In Situ" 2016). The first work, the video installation
26 *People of No Consequence*, is a reflection on the fate of the dying generation
27 of Chechens who went through deportation in 1944 return in 1957, force-
28 ful amnesia and, several decades later, another series of Russian military
29 campaigns that turned them into exiles and refugees once again in one short
30 lifetime. Gaisumov gathered the elderly people whose lives went between
31 these two exiles in an old Soviet house of culture that miraculously survived
32 after many bombings and the subsequent construction boom of the present
33 Chechen administration. The artist filmed these silent old people as they sat
34 in the big hall and looked at its empty stage with fear, hope, anxiety, indif-
35 ference, doom, and stubborn dignity in an attempt to capture the quintes-
36 sence of their several decades of silence. The eyes, body movements, and
37 postures of these people "of no consequence" betray their broken, intimi-
38 dated, and humiliated condition. Yet they also reveal quiet happiness in

being alive and back at home, even if only to die. Although they could not forget what was done to them, they were forbidden to remember or tell their stories. But I am not quick to condemn them for their reluctance to rebel. Having buried in the depths of collective unconsciousness the many “colonial wounds” (Anzaldúa 1999, 25), the unfinished repentances and revenges, the halfway decolonizations, they came to today’s bitter humility and voluntary oblivion for lack of other choices. But their silence (or rather, a tacit consent not to discuss certain historical events) is not necessarily just a sign of colonized minds and bodies. Rather, it is a form of psychological self-defense or repression vacillating between amnesia and rejection. But it is not a final chord and not a requiem as long as there are artists like Gaisumov and wider, people of his generation who are willing to discuss these silences and relentlessly remind us of them in spite of all the efforts of official narratives to erase these lives of no consequence from history.

Gaisumov’s second work, *Household*, consists of a big crate full of everyday objects, clothes, utensils, articles necessary for survival—in short all the real material things that the artist’s family actually used during their long refugee life. It is a materialized past carefully packed and sent to the museum. The symbolism of this work is historically relational as it is an act of not even writing but sending back to the center. The deported Chechens who were dehumanized to the point of being completely objectified were sent to Central Asia in cargo and cattle cars. Gaisumov’s reciprocal gesture of sending the meager objects of his family’s homeless existence to a museum to finally get rid of embodied memories by making this past public and objectified and to prevent any further disembodiment and erasing of its palpable materiality is a decolonial radical return that functions on several levels at once. The artist who used to be in the position of a live object himself, remembers a similar destiny of his ancestors and commemorates this negative lineage capable of triggering emancipating drives and sensibilities through the parcel containing the embodied past. At the museum for permanent storage, the crates serve as a marker of the end of his refugee existence and an attempt to deposit the processed past that he wants to let go but not erase.

In this complex, multilayered, contradictory, and dynamic gesture that, unlike Pavlensky’s works, is not confined to the metaphysics of the present but always communicates with the multiple living pasts, there is still hope for the creation of an alternative reality, a faith in re-existence. It is a forever open ending that refuses to dot the “i”s and therefore leaves us at least

1 some options. Its radical return, together with the forever unfinished na-
2 ture of constant becoming, makes Gaisumov's works truly decolonial. Even
3 in the darkest moment, one of which we are experiencing now, freedom
4 and dignity still prevail—at least, in the realm of decolonial transcendence
5 of modernity/coloniality through the medium of art. This is already enough
6 to cherish a hope.

7 A merciless purging of the grand imperial myths, with their inhumane,
8 unsightly colonial lining, and a decolonizing of collective and personal
9 memory are the only remaining paths to any positive future that will not
10 be stuck with imperial difference. It is hard to imagine this future today
11 from the midst of the darkest imperial moment of its imminent death and
12 its stubborn clinging to life. Yet I do hope that even the phantom pains
13 of the amputated empire will recede sooner than we imagine and a com-
14 pletely different geopolitics and corpo-politics of knowledge, being, and
15 perception would (re)emerge. Multiple dependencies and intersections of
16 oppression require a complex purification, in which the affective mech-
17 anisms are no less but more important than rational arguments. And the
18 decolonial art, on which I mainly concentrated in this book acts as one of
19 the most powerful agents of decoloniality and provides promising ways to
20 prepare for and build the future.
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NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. The term “colonial difference” refers to the complex differential between empires and their colonies. Colonial difference is studied much more thoroughly than imperial difference in postcolonial theory and decolonial thought. Although the empire-colony dichotomy has been criticized time and again for its black-and-white simplicity, and a number of thinkers have attempted to complicate and problematize this binary in more dynamic reciprocal forms (see, e.g., Bhabha 1994; Ortiz 1995), the colonial difference in general has remained the most obvious, visual, and immediate representation of the power dynamics of modernity/coloniality.

Imperial difference disrupts the presumable homogeneity of imperial spatiality and complicates it by drawing attention to various complete or partial losers that, for various reasons, failed to fulfill their imperial missions in the post-Enlightenment modernity. As a result, they occupied second-or even third-class places within the modern imperial hierarchy and increasingly competed among themselves rather than with the winners. Occasional attempts to move up from the second division to the first, an interesting example of which was the USSR, invariably have been prevented and punished by the first-class imperial powers. Even if they retained economic and political independence, the losing empires were colonized intellectually, culturally, and existentially, often via efficient self-colonizing tools.

Similarly to colonial difference, which is sustained through the paradox of an essentially unattainable ideal of progress and an ultimate merging with imperial sameness, the sphere of imperial difference has repeatedly slid into an endless logic of catching up. Second-class empires have developed collective inferiority complexes and unhealthy compensating mechanisms, as well as besieged-camp ideologies and victory-in-defeat myths. Not incidentally, the liminal empires marked by imperial difference were located in Eurasia, which contains the most complex cultural, ethnic, religious,

1 and economic intersections and nodal points. Usually these empires lacked impor-
 2 tant features of the successful modern imperial profile, such as Western Christian-
 3 ity, increasingly in its Protestant forms; capitalism, increasingly in its industrial, not
 4 mercantile, varieties; racial hierarchies that easily distinguished between subjects and
 5 so-called others; and last, but not least, the alphabetical and linguistic affinity, which
 6 seriously affected symbolic belonging to the ruling club.

7 2. I coined the term “Janus-faced empire” in the early 2000s in an attempt to explain
 8 the neurotic Russian imperial configuration as a polity that has never been allowed into
 9 the Western club but secretly, or openly, wants to be accepted. Today, the “Tatar dressed
 10 as a Frenchman,” as the Russian imperial historian Vasily Klyuchevsky (2009) has
 11 described this identity, is lapsing into yet another chauvinistic cycle by bragging about
 12 its exaggerated “Asiatic” qualities. The devious and unreliable imperial Russian Janus
 13 has also been manipulative and strangely adaptable to different conditions, success-
 14 fully imitating and appropriating other imperial models to balance its difficult divided
 15 positionality.

16 An imperial paradox, this Janus has been rich yet poor, providential yet failed,
 17 and always struggling and never quite succeeding in appropriating certain elements
 18 of modernity/coloniality. To survive, it has had to wear different masks for different
 19 partners—European and non-European. In a way, in the presence of Western Eu-
 20 rope it has always felt like a colony and compensated for this by projecting an image
 21 of the Russian/Soviet colonizer as a champion of civilization, modernization, and,
 22 later, specifically socialist modernity into its own non-European colonies. Moreover,
 23 a complex internal hierarchy of intercolonial differences generated a variety of masks
 24 the empire wore to address each of the colonies. When Russia/the USSR was looking
 25 in the direction of its European frontiers (Finland, Poland, the Baltic littoral), it acted
 26 like an unconfident colonizer that was unable to practice imperial superiority or carry
 27 out civilizing missions because of its own lower position in the hierarchy of modernity.
 28 Looking to the East and to the South—the only remaining directions for its imperial
 29 expansion in the post-Enlightenment modern era, Russia/the USSR wore a different
 30 mask: that of a distorted “white man’s burden,” which Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1977, 35)
 31 described when he wrote, “In Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, whereas in Asia
 32 we shall go as masters.” A special case of the complex interplay of the external imperial
 33 and colonial differences in the Janus-faced empire was represented in Russia’s relations
 34 with the intermediary cases of Ukraine and Belarus, whose difference was deliberately
 35 erased and silenced to enhance the insecure Russian sameness. The inconfident Rus-
 36 sian imperial identity asserted itself by denying the existence and forcefully assimilating
 37 these East Slavic ethnic cultures.

38 3. Arguments about whether it would be better to be colonized by Great Britain or
 by Russia and self-defensive statements about how lucky we are that we do not live in
 Afghanistan are typical illustrations of this sensibility in Central Asia.

4. “Make food for powder” is an idiom used by William Shakespeare in *Henry IV*.
 Falstaff says: “good enough to toss; food for powder, food for powder; they’ll fill a pit as
 well as better.” It is normally used to describe combatants who are cynically treated as
 unimportant lives who are easily sacrificed on the battlefield.

5. La Leyenda Negra (The Black Legend) was originally a biased representation of Spain in the historiography of its more successful European imperial rivals (Greer, Quilligan, Mignolo 2008). Here it is used to denote a general style of argumentation meant to demonize the adversary to construct a positive self-representation, habitually used in geopolitical rivalry.

6. Immigration has reached unprecedented numbers in Russia in the past several years and continues to grow. The latest wave has been more politically than economically induced—or, at least, the two factors play equal roles. In a sense, the regime is using the still open borders as a safety valve, to let off the steam. If dissidents, who also tend to be highly educated professionals, are able to leave and are doing so, the threat of revolution is considerably reduced.

7. In the months that passed between writing the first draft and the final version of this book, many more social and economic protests were taking place in the Russian provinces (but not so much in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, with an important exception of the school children and students dominated revolts in the spring of 2017). Among them was the Krasnodar farmers' march on the Kremlin in the late summer of 2016, which was stopped abruptly and violently persecuted at a great distance from Moscow. The farmers, driving tractors, were protesting unlawful seizures of land and harvests by large businesses supported by corrupt local bureaucrats and police, which were leaving thousands of people bankrupt. Another example is the strike by truck drivers that was renewed on a massive scale in the spring of 2017 against the Platon electronic toll system, which assesses fees based on the weight of a truck's cargo and could lead to economic ruin for many truckers who own and operate their vehicles as independent contractors.

In these and other protests, the protesters have wanted to take their social and economic claims directly to the president; they believe that he is not aware of the iniquity that is being created and that, once he finds out, he will restore justice. Thus, rather than Russian government, the protesters target local officials or the West as their enemy. This reflects the stale Russian foundational political myth of the good tsar and the bad boyars that played such an important part in Stalinist times. Paradoxically, these protests are pro-Putin.

CHAPTER 1. The Decolonial Sublime

1. Rancière titled one of his latest books *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (2013). However, in many ways it reiterates his original take on aesthetics.

2. Similarly to other concepts, creolization, which was originally coined outside the West and linked with particular local histories, was fruitfully theorized in the Caribbean tradition and later appropriated by Western theory as a fashionable term. It was subsequently used in mainstream texts mostly in its positive and quite superfluous interpretations, celebrating the fusion of cultural forms and their egalitarian interaction. In this case, persistent power hierarchies in the production of cultural patterns and the absorption and deformation of dependent cultures by dominant cultures, are virtually ignored. Paradoxically, in celebrating creolization Bourriaud appropriates and distorts it, erasing its asymmetries, painful struggles, and element of resistance.

1 Instead, he sees a smooth and continuous blending of everything and everyone in some
2 anti-hierarchical altermodern space, which exists only in his own head. As a result,
3 “creolization” turns into a floating or empty signifier, a sign behind which nothing lies.

4 I prefer a different understanding of “creolization,” which is represented, among
5 other sources, in *The Creolization of Theory*, edited by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei
6 Shih: “The strength of the concept arises directly from its historical specificity. As a
7 process that registers the history of slavery, plantation culture, colonization, settlement,
8 forced migration, and most recently, the uneven global circulation of labor, creolization
9 describes the encounter among peoples in a highly stratified terrain. So it is not just any
10 transculturation but “forced transculturation” (Lionnet and Shih 2011, 25).

11 3. Here transmodernity is understood in Enrique Dussel’s sense. He juxtaposes it to
12 postmodernity and sees it as an alternative yet utopian space of thinking and acting
13 (Dussel 2002). We could widen this juxtaposition to include Bourriaud’s altermodern-
14 ity, as well. Transmodernity overcomes modernity from the position of exteriority or
15 border thinking instead of continuing its endless internal critique, which never prob-
16 lematizes the Eurocentric universalist progressivist totality of modernity as such. In the
17 mechanism of the decolonial sublime, it is especially important that, in the process of
18 delinking and subsequent re-existence, modernity be ultimately overcome.

19 CHAPTER 2. Post-Soviet Art

20 1. After 2010, the National Bolsheviks formed the core of a wider opposition politi-
21 cal alliance known The Other Russia.

22 2. Although Dugin was originally a member of Eduard Limonov’s National Bolshe-
23 vik Party, their paths soon diverged. Today Dugin represents the farthest-right, most
24 statist, most fundamentalist discourse; although it has very little to do with the original
25 concept of Eurasianism, it borrows the name and accentuates the nationalist and impe-
26 rial sides of the sanctified geopolitics. Dugin is notoriously ridiculed for his advance-
27 ment of the aggressive revanchist dream of the planetary geopolitical revenge presided
28 by Russia, after which the lost and “hidden meta-continent will emerge from the
29 depths of the past” and “geopolitics will become a sacred geography” (Dugin 1996, 36).
30 In contrast with Limonov, who has been banned and persecuted, Dugin stands very
31 close to the present Russian administration, often acting as a mouthpiece for populist
32 imperial rhetoric.

33 3. Bombily blog, <http://halfaman.livejournal.com/>.

34 4. E-mail to the author, January 31, 2016.

35 5. Guslitsa is a former textile factory not far from Moscow that was built by local
36 businessmen named Petrashov in 1908. It was abandoned and damaged in the post-
37 Soviet years but in 2012 was bought by a family of businessmen who turned it into
38 an art, cultural, and exhibition center; artists’ residence; and home for several social
movements and local community initiatives. In 2016, however, the artists, social activ-
ists, entrepreneurs, and owners of Guslitsa were forced out by so-called raiders, who
attempted to turn the facility into a warehouse. Luckily the artists were eventually able
to defend their creation.

6. E-mail to the author, January 31, 2016.

7. E-mail to the author, January 31, 2016.	1
8. E-mail to the author, January 31, 2016.	2
9. The Uzbek director Nazim Abbasov's film <i>Eternity</i> (2005), which focuses on the potters' craft and lifestyle, provides interesting, poetic documentation of such a surviving indigenous cosmological tradition as expressed through art.	3
10. See Laura Bulian Gallery, http://www.laurabuliangallery.com/index.html .	4
11. E-mail to the author, November 5, 2010.	5
12. E-mail to the author, November 5, 2010.	6
CHAPTER 4. Vyacheslav Akhunov	7
1. Alexander Volkov (1886–1957) was a Russian avant-garde artist who spent his life in Uzbekistan and merged typically Central Asian topics and subjects, which he often interpreted in Gauguinian Orientalist ways, with suprematist and cubist-futuristic aesthetics.	8
2. From <i>chapan</i> , a traditional Uzbek men's robe. The <i>chapan</i> is a standard souvenir given to important guests in Uzbekistan as a sign of respect.	9
3. The exhibition took place in Saint Petersburg in February 2016 at the private gallery Lyuda. It was titled, "You Will Be Living Under . . ."	10
4. Akhunov refers here to the unique State Art Museum of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, named after I. V. Savitsky, which holds the second-largest collection of Russian avant-garde in the world.	11
5. Mukhamad Salikh (Salih) is one of the Uzbek political opposition leaders and a poet who has political asylum in Norway and lives in Turkey. Repeated attempts have been made to assassinate, arrest, and extradite him.	12
CHAPTER 5. Afanassy Mamedov	13
1. Maxim Gorky Literature Institute in Moscow.	14
2. The novel is <i>Cinnabar</i> (<i>kinovar</i> in Russian, which links phonetically with <i>kino</i> , or cinema) and was published in 2015 in the journal <i>Druzhba Narodov</i> .	15
CONCLUSION	16
<i>Epigraph</i> : Pushkin 1918 (1825), 117.	17
1. In the protest wave of 2011–13 this fragmentation resulted in a multiplication of "Occupy" groups. They chose their own urban spaces with which to be identified. The best-known example was Occupy Abai, which hijacked the Kazakh poet's name and monument in central Moscow to stand for the struggle for human dignity and the right to choose one's destiny.	18
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