

THE NEW YORK OBSERVER

East Is Best

Art from the former Soviet Bloc is having a moment. Where does New York fit in?

By Andrew Russeth

ART "WHEN THE BERLIN WALL CAME DOWN, I understood it was a historical moment, but not really," New Museum curator Massimiliano Gioni said over the phone last week. "I didn't have the alertness to jump on a train and go see" Mr. Gioni, now 37 and director of exhibitions at the New Museum, was a teenager at the time, and he sounded wistful describing his youthful mistake. But then he suddenly perked up. "The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, and I immediately thought, 'I cannot miss this one!' I got in a car with two friends."

Exactly 20 years after that ride, which stretched from his home in Milan through Slovenia all the way to Lithuania, Mr. Gioni has revisited the region in his new exhibition at the New Museum, "Ostalgia" (an East German portmanteau of *ost*, German for east, and *nostalgia*), which presents works by a generation-spanning cast of more than 50 artists who relate to the complicated legacy of the collapse of communism and the fall of the Soviet Union, where many of the artists were born.

He is not alone in his zeal for the art of the region. "Ostalgia" arrives as Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov's work is on view at MoMA, which also recently did shows with Polish video artist Artur Żmijewski and Slovakian conceptualist Roman Ondák. Artists from across the region are increasingly common in museum surveys and on the covers of art magazines. "There is a huge wave of interest in Eastern European art right now," said Boris Groys, an art critic and Russian contemporary art expert who teaches at N.Y.U. "The last time it was fashionable was after *perestroika*."

The globalization of the art world is not new, but in the rise of Eastern European art, it may be manifesting itself in new ways, particularly in the art market. Rather than just bringing bankable names to a variety of international art fairs, topflight New York galleries are casting a wide net to build the diverse roster of artists that is required to remain competitive in the newly global playing field, and many of the artists they are taking on are from Eastern Europe.

"Most of the art world is mapped," said Mr. Groys. "But Eastern European art is not so well investigated." The same could be said of Latin American art, which has also recently received the attention of dealers and curators, he noted. There are also, perhaps, financial calculations. "During the boom, galleries were rushing to pick up artists from emerging art markets," said Michael Gillespie,

a director at the gallery Foxy Production in Chelsea. "Suddenly galleries had new artists from China, and people were curious about Russia for a while, too, with the oligarch money."

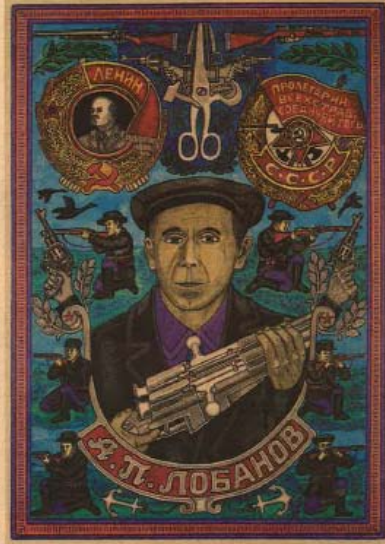
In 2006, Foxy Production began working with the midcareer Russian artist Olga Chernysheva, whose works often depict mundane post-Soviet life in a naturalistic yet eerie style, after Foxy director John Thomson admired one of her videos at the Sydney Biennale. "John mentioned her to me and we just started Googling," Mr. Gillespie said. "We got a bit hooked with the images online, and we emailed her." They aired her a show before they ever met in person. "We certainly weren't looking to get into an emerging market," said Mr. Gillespie. "Olga's work was the opposite of that bling aesthetic." Mr. Gioni has included her in "Ostalgia."

Foxy Production's discovery of Ms. Chernysheva is a far cry from how New York dealers once met their artists. Leo Castelli famously had his first encounter with Jasper Johns during a visit to Robert Rauschenberg's downtown apartment, after Mr. Castelli asked for ice in his drink and accompanied Mr. Rauschenberg to the apartment of Mr. Johns, who owned a refrigerator. The dealer had recently seen the latter artist's Green Target at the Jewish Museum.

Today, New York art dealers search globally for the next star or the long-overlooked master. Anton Kern, who owns a gallery on 20th Street, flew to Poland to meet an artist named Edward Krasinski, after an alternative space founded by Krasinski organized a show with one of Mr. Kern's artists. Though Krasinski, who was in his mid-70s, was familiar in certain European circles, "people did not know his work here," according to Mr. Kern, "and I went there not knowing a lot about Polish art."

"I was blown away by the authenticity of this man, and the ideas he invented in the '60s," Mr. Kern said. Within a few years, he had organized two solo shows for Krasinski, whose stature has since risen in the U.S., though he died in 2004. "Ostalgia" features a series of Krasinski's hanging mirrors, each marked with a horizontal line of blue tape, the artist's trademark. "It was so simple and yet so contemporary and so fresh," Mr. Kern remarked of his initial response.

When Mr. Kern visited Poland in the late '90s, "it was a Kafkaesque kind of moment," he said. "The situation there was really dire." The Eastern Bloc economies were struggling to find their footing, and the art infrastructure was weak. But many of the nations in



Alexander Lobanov, Untitled.

the region thrived over the past decade, and many of the artists in "Ostalgia" have exhibited widely across Europe, though they remain far less known in New York.

"The world is moving further and further east, especially the art world," said Maria Baibakova, the 25-year-old Moscow-born collector and curator who runs Baibakov Art Projects, a foundation that organizes exhibitions with Russian and international artists in Moscow and abroad. "New York is becoming a more distant capital." But Ms. Baibakova said that she feels the New York art world is working hard to keep up.

"We're becoming more aware that there is a very thriving new world that we need to engage with or we'll cease to be relevant," Ms. Baibakova continued. "But New York is very good about being flexible and aggressive when needed." Andra Ursuta, a Romania-born artist who has lived in the U.S. since the mid-1990s, when she was a teenager, and who presents a miniature model of her childhood home in "Ostalgia," agreed. "It's very validating to see this kind of show, to see the depth with which it looks at this part of the world," she said. "Maybe it's signaling that art from the region is no longer such an enigmatic thing; it's been catalogued."

At a time of economic uncertainty, despite an apparently thriving art market, there is also a hope that Eastern Europe's art may present alternatives to the status quo. "We in New York are

very familiar with the idea that with recognition comes the recognition of the market," said Mr. Gioni. "But many of the artists in the show worked without markets and without money, which made their ethical responsibility much stronger and much more important."

Mr. Gioni cited as an example the Russian artist Andrei Monastyrski, whose Collective Actions group staged ephemeral events on the outskirts of Moscow, beginning in the mid-1970s, apart from the official state-sanctioned art institutions of the time, and who is represented in the exhibition by a small photograph of an action on Governors Island. "The role of the artist cannot just be an object provider for a system," the curator said.

Among younger artists in "Ostalgia" who take up such a cause, there is perhaps none more celebrated than the Russian collective Chto Delat?, which was founded in 2003. (Its name translates to "What is to be done?"—the title of a democratic-minded novel by the 19th-century writer Nikolay Chernyshevsky that Lenin commandeered as a title for one of his pamphlets at the turn of the century.) "It would not be an overstatement to say that we are the most exhibited Russian artist internationally," one of the group's 10 members, artist Dmitry Vilenksy, 42, told *The Observer* last week, over cappuccinos in a Le Pain Quotidien on Grand Street in Soho. However, they haven't been

offered a show in Russia in five years, according to Mr. Vilenksy, owing to what he termed an unofficial "professional ban."

Works by the left-leaning Chto Delat?, whose members include artists, philosophers and a poet, often do not take the form of salable artworks. The group organizes marches, prints free publications and holds seminars. On the fifth floor of the New Museum, it has created a mural that presents a history of socialism in the 20th century, and the U.S.'s complicated role within it.

Mr. Vilenksy, like Mr. Gioni, suggested that the Western curators' interest in Eastern European art may, in part, be motivated by the ongoing economic crisis. "People are starting to think about what has occurred and about how to go forward," he said. "To do that you need a map, and you draw maps from the past, where there were other relations and institutions."

Of course, the art market has a habit of transforming even the most radical, apparently noncommercial practices into tradable commodities. How long will the West be able to admire the ethical fortitude of Eastern European artists? *The Observer* asked Mr. Gioni. What will happen if money and attention continue to flow into the region's art market? "That's the drama of today in those places, particularly Russia, where there's been an embrace of anything glamorous and fashionable," he said. "It's too early to say."

Mr. Gioni is quick to note that the show is not meant as a history of avant-garde Soviet and post-Soviet art. "It's a show about memory and it operates like memory of itself," he said. "It's selective, it's unreliable, and it's very emotionally charged." Hanging in one of the galleries, tires to the wall, is a 1974 Fiat that British artist Simon Starling drove from the car company's de-commissioned factory in Turin to its new center in Poland, where Mr. Starling replaced many of its original red parts with white ones. "That car is very much what the show is about," Mr. Gioni said. "It's about taking a trip to look for a place, and both the person who takes the trip and the place itself are transformed by that exchange."

ASKED IF HE was optimistic about the future of Eastern European art, Mr. Vilenksy responded by reading a quote by Mr. Groys from the "Ostalgia" catalogue in which Mr. Groys calls for "the emergence of a new socialist/communist perspective" in order to "redefine the art scene."

"I totally agree," Mr. Vilenksy said enthusiastically. It is hard to imagine many major American artists supporting that statement. (A more international art world may not automatically be a more homogenized one.) But the artist emphasized that he was not calling for a return to the past. "There are so many opportunities for art today," he said. "I grew up with the old system, so I have no ostalgia. None at all."

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An untitled, undated drawing by the Russian artist Alexander Lobanov (1924-2003). Courtesy the New Museum and Collection ABCD, Paris

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