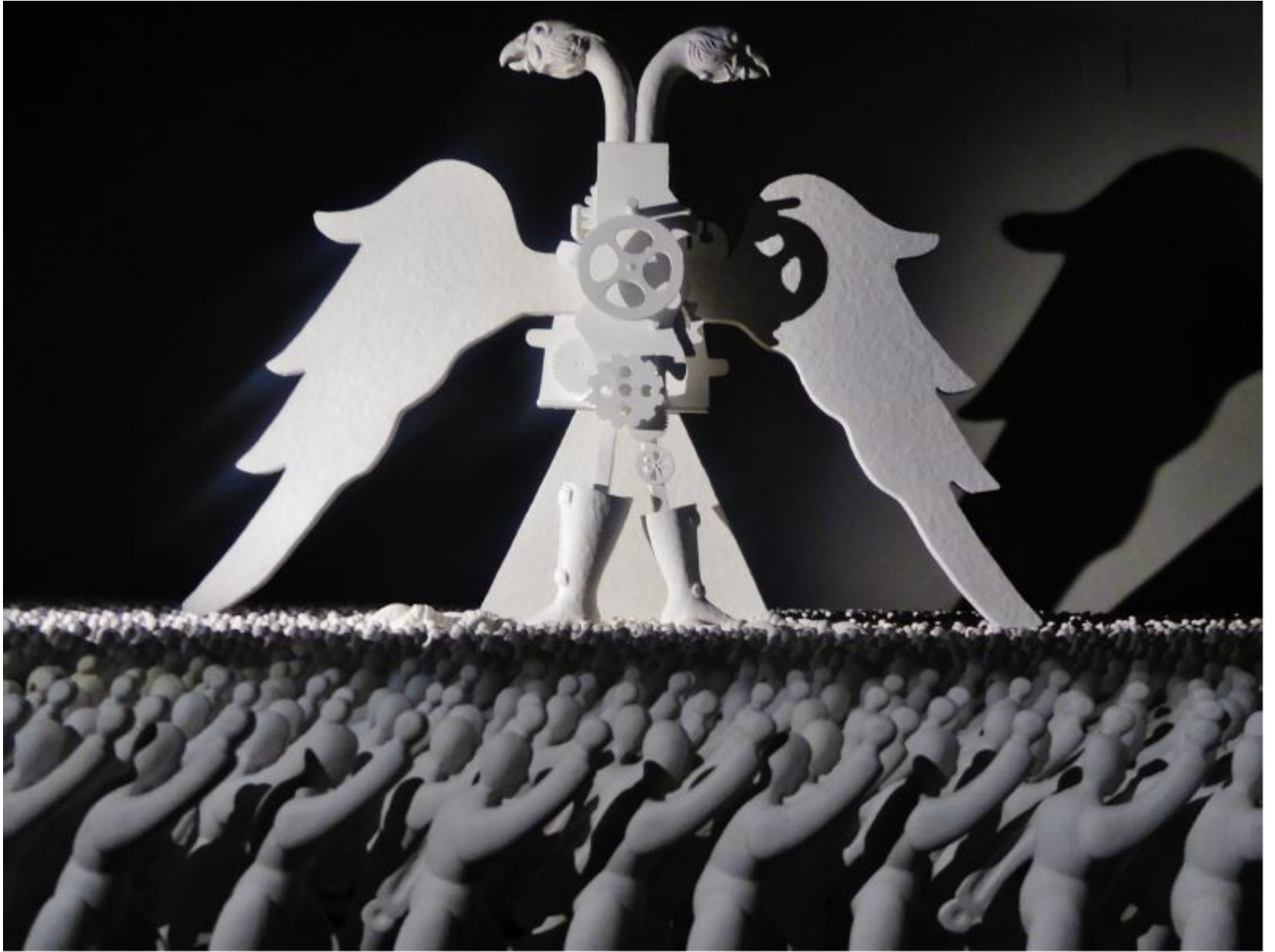


WINGS OF PRAYER OR DESPAIR? AMBIGUOUS RUSSIA OVERSHADOWS VENICE BIENNALE. BY SIMON HEWITT



***VIVA ARTE VIVA!* is the slogan of this year's Venice Biennale. Sounds upbeat, *tutti frutti* and full of *joie de vivre*. The Russian Pavilion is anything but.**

In a *coup* of breathtaking audacity even by his own flamboyant standards, Pavilion Curator Semyon Mikhailovsky, Rector of the St Petersburg Academy, exploits the 1917 Revolution to slam Putinism with the most powerful show seen in the Giardini for years.

Alexei Shchusev's two-storey Russian Pavilion, topped by a double-headed eagle, opened in April 1914 – one of the last Tsarist buildings. You climb a ceremonial staircase, enter a porch, then *POW!* straight ahead, in the Pavilion's first but smallest room, a giant double-headed eagle surges over a table crowded with faceless identical figures, arms raised manically as they march mechanically towards a brave new world.

Not so fast. Artist Grisha Bruskin has them marching off the table into the abyss.

Left/Right, Black/White: all that's lacking are some Goebbels searchlights spearing

into the night sky.

These appear in the next room where, above large, mysterious sculptures in gesso and *papier mâché*, smothered in titles of philosophical works, Bruskin turns video artist – transforming his manic marchers into hollow silhouettes, racing round the walls to end up in a cage. Bombers dive, bazookas fire. The double-headed eagle soars in triumph.

The third room is peopled by more of Bruskin's small, ghostly white figures, arrayed in marching formation amidst monsters, mutants, cannons, bazookas, war planes, pyramids, ziggurats, mausoleums, a baby suicide-bomber and a Kremlin Tower. The only escape: down a black spiral staircase into Hell.

This staircase leads to a corridor filled with white, jagged forms whence heads, limbs and torsos struggle to emerge: the work of Krasnodar duo *Recycle*. The forms are flanked by overlapping black squares and a rectangle enclosing cryptic descriptions. One of these reads */male/ age 37/ activity: high/ reason: threatening – content/status: blocked*. The squares form a code that triggers an app: armed with your iPhone or iPad, you can bring these partial white figures to full-bodied, full-coloured life.

The last room contains a contrastingly low-tech video by Sasha Pirogova that begins in almost total darkness before growing progressively lighter, ending with a group of drably-dressed young people forming a circle on a mound of gravel over a *crunch-crunch* soundtrack (earlier, says Pirogova, we should hear 'the delicate sound of plants growing and flowers unfurling').

The ten-minute film is claustrophobic, quietly hypnotic and concludes Mikhailovsky's artistic odyssey on a note of uncertain optimism. Its subdued mood is a million light years from the slick bling of Russian video stars AES+F, who exploded on to the international stage a decade ago on this very spot under Olga Sviblova.

You emerge from this Concept Album Of A Pavilion wondering how (or if) it was okayed by the Russian Cultural Ministry. The mood is one not just of despair, but of being crushed. Even the people in Pirogova's video appear to have been buried alive under all that gravel before enjoying a miraculous resurrection.

Most of the visitors I spoke to thought the Pavilion bravely and brazenly political, and assumed the double-headed eagles represented the Russian State.



Grisha Bruskin denied this, assuring me that double-headed eagles are among the world's commonest national symbols. I spent the next few days in Venice looking for them, and found one on a 1688 Armenian tombstone.

Semyon Mikhailovsky was adamant that the Pavilion was 'not political' although, as he made this statement with a diplomatic grin, its sincerity seemed open to doubt. He did, though, admit it was 'connected in some way' to the centenary of the October Revolution.

'It's a lot of things' he added. 'It's crowds. It's terrorism. It's art. It's the stage. It's theatre.'

This *All The World's A Stage* approach provides a deft shield against accusations that the Pavilion is concerned with today's political reality. The exhibition is duly named *THEATRVM ORBIS*, and this exotic title – derived from a pioneering world atlas produced by Abraham Ortelius in 1570 – is boldly affixed to the Pavilion wall overlooking the Giardini. Charming to find Latin intruding on contemporary art.

Mikhailovsky's catalogue article is equally erudite. He cites the show's artistic influences as ranging from Fra Angelico and Hieronymous Bosch to movie-maker Fritz Lang and the Futurist Fortunato Depero – via Michelangelo, Giulio Romano, William Blake and Caspar David Friedrich. Grisha Bruskin, meanwhile, expresses fascination with 'Giulio Camillo's enigmatic *Theatro della Memoria*' from the 16th century.

I am reluctant to suggest Bruskin's marching minions also have a bit of the Belayev-Gintovt about them: the learned, quietly spoken Bruskin and Belayev-Gintovt, the truculent gold-ground apostle of Russian Nationalism, are polar opposites. But I *will* point to similarities with Evgeny Vuchetich's Stalinist



altarpiece *Glory to the Soviet People*, conceived in the early 1950s for the main pavilion at VDNKh – where a giant flag of Lenin dominates the multitude rather than a double-headed eagle.



The crowds of humanity painted by the Non-Conformist Alexei Sundukov or in-demand young artist Sveta Shuvayeva also spring to mind. So does the water-bubble video by St Petersburg's Natalya Lyakh, with its murmuring sound-over, at the admirable Venice multimedia exhibition *Hybris* (until June 28).

Grisha Bruskin's wall-to-wall light-show is uncannily reminiscent of the backing screen used by Genesis to accompany their song *In The Cage* on their 2007 world tour. Bruskin uses the cage image both in his video and, in the third room, in a plaster model. (I am not implying he was inspired by – far less plagiarizing – a rock group's stage set; when I mentioned Genesis, it was clear he had never heard of them.)

The reason why Bruskin has suddenly, at the age of 71, incorporated video into his work is fascinating – and linked to the hurried genesis of the Russian Pavilion.

He had been working on his epic installation – entitled *Scene Change* – for over two years when, last Autumn, there was a knock on the door of his Moscow studio. It was Semyon Mikhailovsky, the recently anointed Commissioner of the 2017 Russian Pavilion.

According to Bruskin, Mikhailovsky was planning to devote the Pavilion entirely to young artists, but changed his mind after seeing his installation. He initially proposed

Bruskin occupy the entire Pavilion rather than just the top floor. Later, Mikhailovsky decided to bring in other artists, and hit on his ‘stairway to hell’ idea – placing the staircase in the middle of the second room. Bruskin was horrified. His recourse to video aims to detract visitors’ attention from this intrusive staircase and force their gaze higher up the walls.

Bruskin told me he had had no contact with the Pavilion’s other artists while the exhibition was being prepared. Given its powerful unity of theme and mood, I found this astonishing – and remarkable testimony to Mikhailovsky’s curatorial skill.



Mikhailovsky’s catalogue traces the roots of Recycle’s icebound figures to Dante’s Ninth Circle of Hell. The visual comparison that occurred to me was with Gaspard Marsy’s 1675 fountain at Versailles celebrating the Greek giant *Enceladus* – buried alive beneath the lava of Mount Etna.

RUSSIANS ON THE MARCH

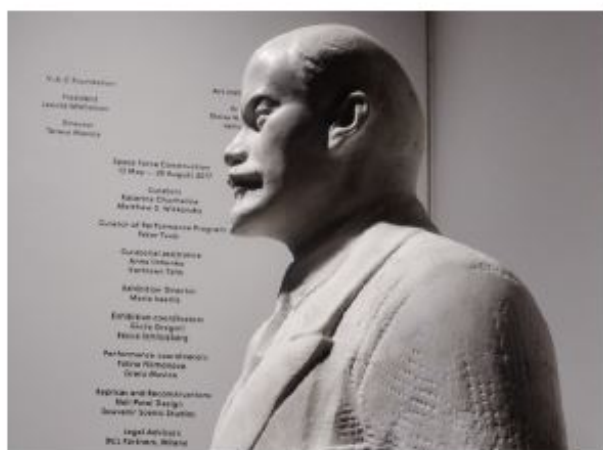
THEATRVM ORBIS was just one of a plethora of Russian shows and events that opened in Venice in the second week of May. No other country had such an extensive, pervasive presence by the Lagoon.

The centenary of the Russian Revolution was also the theme of the *Space Force Construction* exhibition staged by the **V-A-C Foundation** at the Palazzo delle Zattere, their new waterfront premises. This fused Soviet archive material and a

couple of Deinekias with contemporary reconstructions and artworks – the zaniest being Irina Korina’s monochrome installation under the roof, inspired by a 1930 Yuri Schukin design for a Carnival Capitalist (a photo of which was displayed in an adjacent room). Korina is also present, again massively but this time psychedelically, in the Arsenale. Beware overkill.

To front their exhibition, V-A-C came up with nothing better than a statue of Lenin. Can’t we give the balding bandit a break?

Hopefully Russia’s neurotic obsession with its Communist Past will be put to rest once the Bolshevik centenary is over, but – as this obsession manifestly serves the purposes of the country’s current ownership – I doubt it.



Russia is not the only country still in thrall to its dictators. The Albanian Pavilion showcased paintings by Leonard Qylafi blurrily inspired, in a Faibisovich sort of way, by magazine photos of Enver Hoxha youth rallies. The Azerbaijan Pavilion peddled the usual propaganda – in word and video – about its multi-ethnic paradise.

In total contrast, the Native American Pavilion took the form of a group of wooden pillars erected, Stonehenge-like, in an overgrown students’ garden. I mention this offbeat project because it was ‘supported’ by the Russian-born, London-based art impresario Victoria Golembiovskaya.

Russians were everywhere in Venice this mid-May: [Lidia Vitkovskaya](#) and [Denis Mikhaylov](#) at the *Personal Structures* show in the Palazzo Mora; **Arsen Revazov** with red-saturated photographs on crumpled matt paper at ar33studio; U.S.-based dealer Oksana Salamatina launching a magnificent book about the Moscow colourist **Andrei Sharov**; St Petersburg’s [Agniya Mirgorodskaya](#) and Anastasia Blokhina throwing a Guggenheim party to celebrate next year’s inaugural **Riga Biennale**; Dagestan artist Taus Makhacheva fronting a liquid Cosmoscw press conference....

The *Hybris* show mentioned above offered the chance to see or re-see Boris Kazakov's wonderful 1999 video **Stakes**, based on discarded rushes by the late and great Petersburg Necro-Realist, Evgeny Yufit. There was an exhibition devoted to Sasha Ponomaryov's **Antarctic Biennale**; a press conference announcing the curator of next year's **Moscow Young Biennale** (Lucrezia Calabrò Visconti); and a splendidly baroque light and sound spectacular conceived by Surikov graduate Narine Arakelian in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, entitled **L'Illusion du Mariage** and featuring Swiss-based opera singer Julia Gertsova, and threateningly tall performance artist Danila Polyakov.



Non-Russian highlights visible in Venice this summer include Poland's 1970s op-art exponent **Ryszard Winiarski** at Palazzo Bollani; veteran Bucharest conceptualist **Geta Brătescu** at the Romanian Pavilion in the Giardini; the *Exodus* series of Refugee paintings by Bosnia's **Safet Zec** in the Chiesa della Pietà; and **Jan Fabre** at Abbazia di San Gregorio. Give Damien Hirst a miss.



Two Russian artists have solo shows that run until the end of June. Both grapple with utopia. **Gosha Ostretsov's** fantasy project *I've Been Abducted Hundreds of Times*, at the Palazzo Nani Bernardo, features paintings, video, plexiglas sculptures, printed shirts, light-boxes, obelisks and pencil portraits of the science-fiction writers Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, H.G. Wells (bizarrely dubbed *Herbert*). But even escapist Gosha cannot escape the call of Big Brother: his fourth pencil portrait is of *George Orwell*.

The big **Valery Koshlyakov** exhibition at Ca' Foscari, *We Have Never Stopped Building Utopia*, majors on epic, drip-paint depictions of architectural monuments, shot through with bits of blue sky and palm tree, and accompanied by Maxim Gorky and the occasional member of the proletariat. These paintings deserve a more atmospheric venue, and the decision to cram an army of Koshlyakov's ingenious, neo-Constructivist sculptures into the same small room is grotesque.

It has recently become fashionable in Moscow art circles to sneer at Koshlyakov for not evolving. I don't buy that. By the age of fifty (he is now 55) Koshlyakov had displayed a versatile mastery of different media not surpassed since Picasso: he has nothing to prove and no need to pursue different trends, fads or techniques. Whatever Koshlyakov does is shot through with skill, integrity and visionary power. He has been happily painting buildings for the last few years. So what? Koshlyakov loves architecture with passion and precision, transforming architectural ensembles into metaphors for (failed) utopia... *trapped in empty monumental shells doomed to inevitable disintegration* (to quote the press release).



This disintegration – the haunting *leitmotif* of Russia's dark presence at this year's Venice Biennale – was given blistering form at the Pushkin Museum's show *Man As Bird* at the Palazzo Soranzo van Axel. The show was mainly Russian, but not only; and mainly video, but not entirely. Why the Pushkin should suddenly allocate its meagre resources to contemporary art – a field in which Moscow institutions are already plentiful – is a good question.



Even so: *Man As Bird* has its moments – the most exciting provided by *Exploded Views*, an interactive video installation by Holland's Marnix de Nijs that allows the viewer (using a tactile control unit) to plot his or her course through a nocturnal world of disintegrating buildings. If you want to blow up St Isaac's, this is your chance.

Meanwhile, close by, Yuri Kalendarev's giant gongs sound the death knell of the old régime, or perhaps – who knows? – the current one. At the May 10 opening, black-clad hostesses flitted in and out of the Palazzo's tiny rooms sporting angel wings that seemed to have shrunk since they flew off the Kabakov drawing-board in 1999.



The silent, wasted wings of freedom.

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