

ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

MARCUS WILLIAMS ONE DAY IN THE FACTORY

This paper is presented following the New Zealand visit and Unitec artists Residency of two Russian artists and their collective project the Factory of Found Clothing (FNO). It begins with an introduction to the practice of FNO and it then examines how the interface between object, performance and collaboration developed in their practice. It goes on to give an account of the collaborative aspect of the project ‘they’ made while here; ‘The Greatest Idiot in New Zealand’.

Diffused in a variably sized and constituted collective, renouncing authorship and working across discipline and media, yet celebrating the aura of the artistic object and operating from a position of moral certainty; the work of Natalya Pershina and Olga Egorova is testimony to Lyotard’s idea that post modernity is a nascent form of modernism. The movement of modern art toward the pure line, colour, form and space of an ‘internationalist ideal’ is reversed in the work of Gluklya and Tsaplya (Natalya and Olga’s artists pseudonyms). Their Factory of Found Clothing (FNO) engages directly with the world around them by means of various interventions. Yet paradoxically, a seminal philosophical text, central to the emergence of a modern art, is perhaps as relevant to their project as to that of the internationalist movement itself. Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* argued that the world we live in is shaped by our own minds and that ‘the thing in itself’ is unknowable. In this Kantian milieu

the modern artist is engaged in a struggle to escape from the prison of the mind to contact a more concrete reality. Kant's mind dependency refers to the material of the world around us and how we perceive it, while Gluklya and Tsaplya are engaged in a struggle with a mind dependency defined by a complex set of moral rationalisations; perhaps more aptly described as modern economics. As such, their practice must be considered in the context of Russian modern history and its associated critical discourses.

In their manifesto, Gluklya and Tsaplya state;

“The place of the artist is on the side of the weak.

Weakness makes a person human, and it is by overcoming weakness that heroes are born.

We do not extol weakness, but rather appeal to kindheartedness and humanity.

The time has come to return compassion to art!

Compassion is an understanding of the weakness of others and a joint victory over that weakness”.

This particular ‘artistic struggle’ might be argued to relate more closely to Kant's primary *moral* philosophy introduced in his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, which asserted a *categorical imperative* as a standard rationality from which all morality is derived. Yet Gluklya and Tsaplya's projects have less to do with the metaphysics of morality; why and how morality exists, and more to do with the potential role of art in society with respect to morality and indeed, social and personal emancipation. Further, rather than hinging on a fixed, transcendental maxim, FNO are engaged in a collaborative process which is context dependent and derived from a participating public/audience. A kind of ‘action research’ where knowledge is obtained from systemic, empirical observation and the resulting information can form the basis for direct social or political intervention on the part of the researcher; rather than anything imperative.

Even in today's highly globalised world, art is generally a reflection of the social context from whence it comes, (as paradoxically the aspirations of modern arts internationalism ultimately proved to be). Jeff Koons, the quintessentially American neo liberal stock broker and “futures market player turned artist” is in many respects the most succinct artistic signifier of his time and place. Taking Andy Warhol's factory into mass fabrication Koon's eighties junk bond version of art production churns out the kitsch objects of an unapologetic materialist idolatry, typifying Hal Foster's notion of an art of ‘cynical reason’. There is not a more perfect antithesis for

the art of FNO. Right now, on the other side of what was so recently called the ‘iron curtain’ a westerner might be forgiven a momentary (Bolshevik) amnesia while strolling through the streets of today’s Moscow where the advertising billboards are like vast portals into other worlds; promised lands yearned for in the austere 1970’s Soviet landscape of a Bond film. Yet the revolution did happen and contrary to a common western perception, it is not forgotten.

The longest running FNO project ‘Utopian Shop of Clothing’ aims to provide both symbolically and in practice, an alternative paradigm to the prevailing consumerism of the ‘new Russia’. It produces and retails re constituted clothes/art objects made and sold by young working class female volunteers from regional Russian locations and typifies the way in which Gluklya and Tsaplya reclaim the socio-political legacy of their countries own brand of modernism. Here are some excerpts from the Mission Statement of the shop.



Clothes from ‘The Utopian Shop of Found Clothing’ St Petersburg

This shop was created in order to remind people (be they men, women, girls or boys) that they are free, that there is true love on earth, and that they are not obligated to follow what others say, neither their parents nor the boss at work, but rather, they can find ways to solve all problems, ways to exist in this world.

Their internal world (including all weaknesses, fears, and illusions) is a treasure, despite the brutal reality of everyday life, which often argues against this tenderness.

In addition to object production; the young collaborators who typically lack any art training, are facilitated in realising their own socio political aspirations through workshops leading to various ‘art projects’. They are empowered to embrace alternative strategies for personal identity, free from the financially crippling consumerism in new Russia.

The shop unashamedly embraces the principles of modernities grand emancipation project. It declares itself as ‘Utopian’, it runs collectively and its products are authored as such.



‘The Utopian Shop of Found Clothing’ Pushkinskaya St Petersburg

The things in the store try to converse with the observer about his or her desires, longings, unquenchable hopes and dreams. These things differ from ordinary objects

in that they have already conversed with people (other people wore them, and the artist pondered over them.) They are wiser than ordinary things and, it follows, much closer to the human heart.

Like the constructivism of post revolutionary Russia; the shop bridges the gap between artist and worker, glorifies objects, which represent common people, and generates art, which might be useful to society (clothing instead of painting for example).

The FNO Shop can bravely be called a project, because it also functions as a teaching program...

The 'project' is motivated to reach out and spread its ideological position. It is comparable, perhaps to the Soviet impulse for revolutionary diaspora spreading the doctrine worldwide, (New Zealand?) to ensure the survival of the 'new', hard won state.

It could be said, that the FNO Shop sells things "inside out," because unlike ordinary clothing that hides the sensitivities of its wearer as an apparatus of the collective mindset, this clothing actually reveals it. By showing a glimpse of the wearer's soul, it manifests a relationship to the world as to an ideal lover who understands and accepts you as you are, or even as more than you are.

These associations with constructivism and utopian idealism are quite clear, yet they might appear much more simplistic than they really are. There is a different emphasis in the shops statement and in the FNO manifesto, one that focuses on tenderness and the human heart rather than solidarity and class struggle. Clothing operates as a central signifier in these early FNO works; suggesting the fragility of the inner being in its relationship with the external world of the state, the 'collective mindset' or the 'social contract' as Julia Kristeva would describe it.



‘Triumph of Fragility’ St Petersburg 2003

After the nineties; although the Utopian Shop carried on and indeed continued until a few months ago, Gluklya and Tsaplya increased that aspect of their work, which was temporal as their thinking shifted to a greater interest in the significance of clothing as a ‘skin or interface’. Or in the artists own words from the interview *The Labor and Breath of Romanticism* with Anjelika Artyukh.

(<http://chtodelat.wordpress.com/2008/09/30/gluktsapkino/>) (Tsaplya)...

‘...Gluklya and I began to think that we also found clothing interesting because it’s the boundary between the individual and the world. Clothing is a person’s frame. This means working with the essence of individuality, with the way it’s constructed. The question arose: how can we carry out this work? We did an action, “The Dress’s Voyage.” We took a silly polka-dot dress, made it our literary heroine, and sent it to the Crimea, where it did things we couldn’t do.

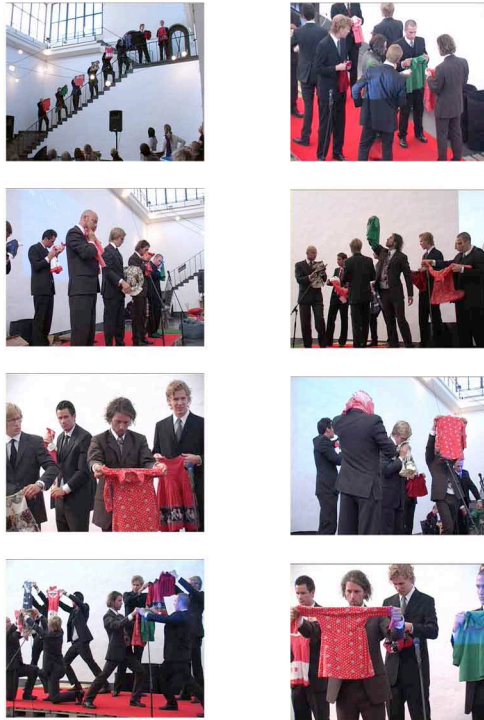
What emerged is a kind of hybrid between sculpture and performance; performing with ‘objects from the shop’ in a manner of speaking.

This mode of practice is epitomised in the ‘Triumph of Fragility’ 2003 in which the

familiar sight of St Petersburg's naval cadets marching through the streets is made strange, as they hold white fabric shapes emblematic of little girls dresses.; only coming to a halt at the 'eternal flame' of the Soviet, which still burns in what was once Leningrad. The conceptual thread of the relationship between internal fragility and organised society or 'state' is carried forward in this piece, which was performed in the streets. The iconographic power of the images from this work lie in the confluence of the openness of the baby faced military cadets, the glory of the Tsarist fortified city of St Petersburg, elemental Soviet symbolism and the held objects. Objects which possess in equal quantity their own signifying content, not only as 'white dresses' (femininity, simplicity, vulnerability, grace) but also as constructivist objects from the Factory (of Found Clothing) where objects are made or found and resurrected by female workers. As 'sculptural art objects' they can be read in the context of their production; devolving the relationship between artists and worker, making objects of societal use, venerating the object as symbol of the worker (mother, nurturer, nurse) and spreading resistance to the consuming symptoms of materialism.

The appropriation and alteration of clothing within the Utopian Shop is part of a broader sociological action, which aimed to educate and empower through art; the object is a function of this, not an end in itself. The integration of 'object' into performance, although deeply psychological, is ultimately political and not concerned with extending the form of contemporary art. The signifying potential of the object (dress's) is exploited as a veneration of the role of women in the spirit of constructivism and integrated into a non-object idiom, which is born of both necessity and political motivation.

This interplay between performance and sculptural object is played out again in 'Garden for Businessman' where immaculately suited professionals extemporise and perform with children's clothing in a quintessentially modern corporate environment. In both cases the protagonists play a central role in determining the nature of the work, which again explores the complex interaction between a sensitive, internal humanity and its public face. Like the naval cadets, the businessmen in a personal theatre of 'dress play' express potential layers of tenderness and even powerlessness; in spite of their costumes of authority. They are helplessly drawn into a paradigm perhaps to some degree outside of their grasp; becoming signifiers of an agenda sadly alien to the world of business. With this collaborative strategy the artists undermine the essentialism of Kant's 'categorical imperative', avoiding a simplistic binary opposition of 'inner' and 'outer'.



"Сад для бизнесменов"

"Garden for businessman"

‘Garden for Businessman’ Stockholm 2004

This collaborative dimension; in the context the overall FNO ‘project’, operating as it does within the framework of a highly didactic manifesto; is the mitigating consideration in a post modern critique of essentialism.

The artist is not a mentor or tutor, but a friend; not a genius, but an accomplice. Rather than enacting didactic social projects, we must help people to stop fearing themselves, help them to accept themselves and grow better. Society is made up of people. Only by helping these people follow the path of self transformation, do we change society. There is no other way.

As curator and in many respects, collaborator, it has been intriguing to observe this intertextual and collaborative process at first hand in the place specific project 'The Greatest Idiot in New Zealand'; an FNO project developed with 8 young New Zealand artists. The project involves searching for New Zealand's greatest idiot; an idiot not in the sense we might think, but instead based on Fyodor Dostoyevsky's enigmatic character; Prince Myshkin, from his novel 'The Idiot'. In the national call for nominations Gluklya and Tsaplya said;

...to find and identify New Zealanders who embody the qualities of Myshkin and apply those traits in order to solve contemporary social problems'.

Лучший Идиот в Новой
Зеландии.

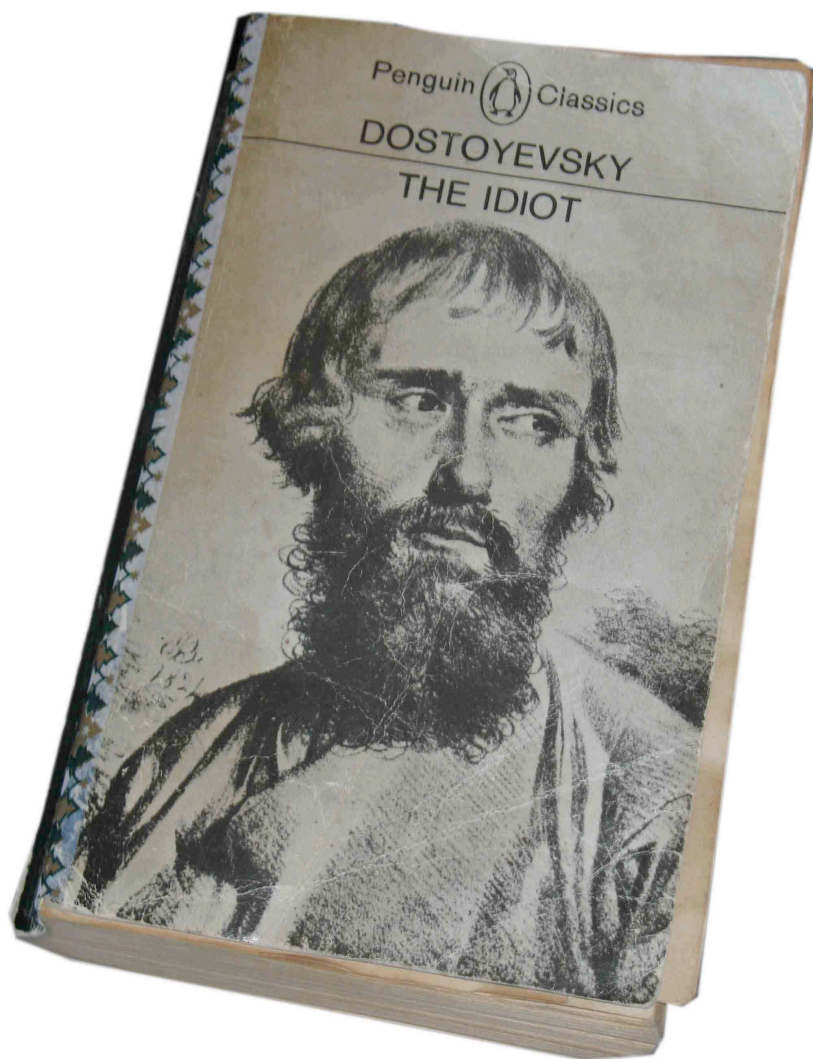
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The Greatist Idiot
in New Zealand

competition

In Dostoyevsky's damning critique of Russia's 19th century ruling class; Prince Myshkin is a dreamy, guileless character that arrives onto a self-serving aristocratic scene penniless and without object. His belief in truth and beauty; his open and direct

speech soon land him the title of 'idiot'. Yet even as he is ridiculed, he is privately respected and some seek solace and advise in his company. Although a complex and ambiguous character he stands for compassion, tolerance, love and friendship amidst a bitter contest for wealth and status.



FNO and the young New Zealand collaborators collectively decided from the 25 nominations on New Zealand's greatest idiot, short listing five people and then choosing the winner.

Since Myshkin's New Zealand heirs are constitutionally incapable of identifying themselves, we call upon you to nominate your own candidates for your country's Greatest Idiot.

The newly assembled collective then developed works in honour of the nominees and the greatest idiot for two Auckland galleries; MIC Toi Rerehiko and Snowwhite at Unitec. This collective process was complex, as the group explore their own cultural and generational differences in defining ‘the idiot’; differences also between Dostoyevsky’s 19th century morality and the very different morality of today. This complexity increased as the art began to be produced. As with ‘Garden for Businessman’ the ‘Idiots’, who unsurprisingly turned out to be strong individuals themselves, increasingly provided significant conceptual and aesthetic content as the project evolved. For example; in the case of The Greatest Idiot in New Zealand; Ivy Smith; and her extended ‘family’ of fostered teenagers began to write rap songs and choreograph performance and dance for the video work. In addition to this; Ivy’s ‘kids’, who have been variously abandoned, brutalised and sexually abused, manufacture a series of masks which end up as an integral story telling device in the video piece and then are exhibited in the exhibition.

In the ‘Shop of Utopian Clothing; Idiot Branch’ at Unitec’s Snowwhite Gallery; FNO procured clothing from each of the shortlisted nominees and the New Zealand artists modified each item with texts and symbols related their specific stories of compassionate idiocy. In addition to this right up till yesterday when the exhibition finished and after FNO had left the country; the collaborators continued to modify old clothing and sell the work in the ‘shop’. All the profits from the sale of the ‘artworks’ went to support Ivy and her household of rescued souls. The essentialism of a statement like... *Only by helping these people follow the path of self transformation, do we change society. There is no other way...* is somewhat mitigated by this artistic strategy. The status of authorship, authenticity and even, privacy are sent into a spin. The most poignant question coming from this situation is, I believe, when the above statement chorused by such a collective; what possible mutations have occurred to the weave and weft of essentialism?

Transforming the production of fine objects (dresses) into a pedagogical process of self-transformation, engaging public institutions and individuals in performances and happenings and working in collaboration with artists and artists subjects; Gluklya and Tsaplya subsume Russian socialist and utopian history into their own socio political agenda. The rhetoric of the Bolshevik revolution is ‘feminised’ and exploited as a tool to discuss and act on the root of the socialist impulse; human fragility and its counterpoint compassion. The investigative and collaborative strategies employed in many of these projects cleverly solicit the responses of the public avoiding didactic

moral imposition; reactivating Kant's categorical imperative and the collectivist aspect of human empathy. In this way the aesthetics of the Factory of Found Clothing is relational and as such borne of a socio political variety of modernity; not at all of a discourse around visual forms and fundamentally different to any 'western trajectory'.

(Finally there is the signifying role of the very notion of 'object' within the context of contemporary art. In work which seems ostensibly rooted in an expanded field of 'post-object art' (Rosalind Krauss 'Sculpture in the expanded Field' *October* Spring 1979) 'The Triumph of Fragility' appears to integrate 'the object' into this milieu. This might understandably be read in this way but it is right here that the socio-historical framework must be most carefully considered. They talk of a lack of local context for what they are doing. Again from the interview with Anjelika Artyukh (Gluklya)...

"We could present our dresses, but it was just that back in those days people didn't say it was art. It wasn't considered art, and the experts still have their doubts. We know it's art, but the experts haven't yet gotten their heads around this."

Even in the nineties an infrastructure for contemporary art in Russia is adolescent and the ubiquity of the non-object idioms of performance and conceptual art can in part be seen in this light; necessity being the mother of invention. (NB – Ap Art or Apartment Art of the seventies; work made and exhibited in apartments) The integration of sculptural objects into performance is not a 'return' to the object as it might be seen in a Western context; but a semiotic interrogation of that particular object. Anjelika Artyukh's interview (Tsaplya)...

We thought that it (old clothing) was like a person: it fashions itself via sacrifice and loss; it loses buttons and collars, it acquires patches. Clothing-as-body.)

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