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Reviews

# Third Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art 2009

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The Third Moscow Biennale was organised by the state and city authorities, and by Moscow's art institutions. The main project was curated by Jean-Hubert Martin and exhibited at the Center for Contemporary Culture Garage (CCC Garage). The forty special projects and the parallel programme were not only spatially distant from Jean-Hubert Martin's project but also curated independently by mostly Russian curators. The special guests section presented solo shows, for example, Luc Tuymans and of the most – ostensibly – promising Russian artists.

Jean-Hubert Martin denies having a determined theme for the main project of the Third Moscow Biennale, stressing that this would probably overshadow the artists' personalities or the specificity of the works. His curatorial project for the Biennale is



styles and exclusive schools – hence his title, *Against Exclusion*. In place of a theme he proposes to seek out a universal logic of art, demonstrated by making equations between contemporary and ancient or traditional art. Although in many ways these equations remain questionable, and the concept of traditional art remains unclear,<sup>3</sup> Martin makes a definite statement against the new academicism and the obsession with intellectualism, which, according to Martin, has been provoked by Conceptualism, Minimalism and Arte Povera. He points up the problems that can be caused by a too close reading of theory and philosophy, namely that it obscures art's 'inherent spectacular properties'.<sup>4</sup> Although Martin professed he wished to avoid confrontations, as the title 'Against Exclusion' claims, with this anti-position he certainly upset the Moscow-Conceptualism influenced art scene. And his motivations seem to be derived from projects outside Moscow. In his talk at the Biennale he did not discuss his engagement with the city and its culture, but rather his previous projects. The impression was that the Biennale is a collage of his previous exhibitions – such as 'Magiciens de la Terre' and 'Das endlose Rätsel' – even a kind of memoir of his professional life.

Probably one of Martin's key 'universalist' stratagems is to show the work of artists outside the professional art circuit of a capitalist society. This seems to be an attempt to get back to the romantic conception of the artist who produces absolutely independently from the market. Martin seems to be aiming at a new formation of the myth of the independent artist, presenting 'unprofessional' artists as these independent agents, and himself as their preserver. The same can be said about his commitment to ancient art, as in his exhibition 'Das endlose Rätsel'. Martin seems to claim legitimacy for these objects as art in contemporary society seemingly precisely because they were produced independently from contemporary capitalism. The exhibited work is thus distanced from its context spatially and temporally. Martin claims absolute autonomy for the exhibited object, attributing to it its own life and the ability to communicate, without any supplementary or supporting text.

to change their form when seen from different perspectives. Substantial ambiguity can also be ascribed to the Russian artist group AES+F and their work for the Biennale, *Défilé*. It shows a series of seven images on light boxes, each of them showing the corpse of an unidentified person. With the aid of digital editing, the corpses have been dressed in haute couture and are supposed to appear as 'floating over an invisible podium, the edges of their clothes fluttering as if they were gliding over a catwalk'.<sup>5</sup> The artists' statement says that the work is a critique of the professional world of haute couture and a *memento mori*.<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically, this work was criticised for not being provocative enough, and in Russia, it seems, provocation is a key category by which to judge art. According to such judgement, it would have been a successful work, had it been removed from the exhibition by the authorities. Instead, Martin merely put up an additional wall to block a direct view of it.<sup>7</sup> This work especially and AES's work in general, is ambiguous mainly because their statements contradict the aesthetics of their work. Likewise, their *Islamic Project* (1996–2003) looks precisely like a set of anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda posters, no matter how long the AES explanations to the contrary. The question remains whether such an ambiguity is interesting to Martin, or whether he just did not engage properly with these artists. In 2008 Martin was a member of the Kandinsky Prize jury, and though he could not vote because of illness, he did not protest when Alexey Beliaev-Guintovt (a leading member of a fascist organisation in Russia) was awarded the prize.<sup>8</sup>

It is noticeable how many animals and insects were present as part of the exhibited works. Céleste Boursier-Mougenot showed finches flying around and sitting on guitars (*From Here to Ear* 2009), Huang Yong Ping showed snakes, turtles and various insects (*Theater of the World*, 1993–1995), Dmitry Tsvetkov's *Ice Age* (2008–2009) presented stuffed animals wearing fur coats, and Koen Vanmechelen's *The Cosmopolitan Chicken Project* (2008) showed stuffed and living chickens. It seems that Martin has assembled anthropomorphised animals as the protagonists and antagonists of a fable, a genre far exceeding modern art. An interesting precedent



surrounding it – one might see in the vulture the spectre of globalisation. At such points, Martin perhaps alludes to criticisms of contemporary Russia, which, despite its claims to the contrary, does not tolerate explicit criticism, inducing a renewed need for critical fables.

Martin has stressed the importance of the historical context of the main venue building,<sup>9</sup> but his curatorial project neglects any serious dialogue with it. Designed as a bus garage by Konstantin Melnikov, in cooperation with the engineer Vladimir Shukhov in 1926–1927, the building is a reconstructed monument of constructivist architecture. Until 1999 the building was used as a garage, but since then it has suffered serious damage. The Russian government did not care about restoration, and simply moved the buses to another place, without any plans for further use of the building. Multi-functionality is a leading issue in negotiations over the reconstruction or restoration of avant-garde monuments. As Alexey Vorontsov, who was in charge of the 2002 reconstruction, said in the lecture during the Biennale: ‘Now the building can be used for whatever.’ The fact that this building was not designed to be used for whatever seems to be forgotten or suppressed. The Biennale visitor gets little sense of the architecture of the building. Only at the rear part of the garage is there a possibility to distance oneself from Martin’s labyrinth of plasterboards. This is where some artworks referred formally to the façade of the garage (Anish Kapoor’s *Push Pull*) and thematically to architecture in general (Wim Delvoye’s *D11*). Dmitry Gutov’s *Parallax* allowed a glimpse of the roof of the garage, and his overhead hanging metallic structures with black squares and other geometrical figures did refer to the Russian avant-garde, though in a too obvious manner. So there seem to have been some formal references to Melnikov’s architecture, and even Gutov’s attempt to evoke what a communist art might have been,<sup>10</sup> but there was no engagement with the contemporary negation of the original use of the building, meaning the negation of the Communist project.

Many of the special project venues are former factories located in the centre of Moscow. Only a few years ago industrial production was moved to the periphery of



maybe one of the most popular special projects was exhibited. Russian Forever includes many of the best known Russian artists, such as Valery Koshlyakov, Avdey Ter-Oganian, Anatoly Osmolovsky, Dmitry Gutov. According to Boris Groys, the exhibition explores the relationships between design and anti-design, mass production and the design of originals.<sup>11</sup> Baibakov Art Projects occupied probably the best spaces in Red October with a view over the river and the Cathedral of the Redeemer (where the Soviets had planned to build the Palace of Soviets), as well as a view of Zurab Tsereteli's controversial, almost 100-metre-tall statue of Peter the Great. Baibakov Art Projects also presented Luc Tuymans and Olga Chernysheva who, according to the curator (Groys), uncovers the art in the quotidian. Her documentary and at the same time naturalistic photographs were presented in small light boxes, but did not make serious attempts to justify their presence at a Biennale of contemporary art.

Further projects could be found on the territory of Winzavod – a former wine factory and now a gallery and creative-industries quarter where established galleries presented artists such as Alexander Brodsky, Sergei Bratkov, Pavel Pepperstein, Alexander Vinogradov and Vladimir Dubosarsky. This is also where the Atelier Van Lieshout presented a model of an independent city which would be absolutely self-sustainable. Joep van Lieshout criticises the rationality of profit-maximisation which ends with 'the exploitation of human beings on the part of the infrastructure itself'.<sup>12</sup> This familiar aim results in an arresting focus: 'Only once people are able to completely dispose of their waste themselves are they actually independent of the state.'<sup>13</sup> Certainly there was not space enough for new philosophical notions of freedom, but it is all the more disappointing that the conclusion of this project is that freedom is not possible.<sup>14</sup> At the Proun gallery Ekaterina Degot proposed a radical curatorial project: 'Kudymkor is the Engine of the Future'. This is about the life of Leonid Subbotin-Permyak who, according to Degot, once brought the ideas of the avant-garde to Perm. Her project is not far from her ideal: absolute independence



September–October 2009, courtesy of Baibakov Art Projects



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Valery Koshlyakov, *Temple*, 2009, scotch tape on wall, 400 × 700 cm, courtesy of the artist



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could be found in the special project by HOOK or by CROOK. IGHAR DANILISEV'S *THE FIGURE* (1998) is an installation of a large-scale chess board, photographs and a vitrine, proposing an investigation of an unknown object, relying only on its materiality and form. This work may be seen as a very subtle critique of the main project of the 3rd Moscow Biennale. The fact that this object ostensibly had been purchased in 1990, on the verge of the turn to capitalism, and at a flea market which is a place of condensed and confused contexts, gives the work an ambivalent dimension that can be read as an ironic allusion to the ignorance of context displayed in Martin's curatorial work at the Biennale.<sup>15</sup> But Martin's abstraction from context in the name of a universal logic of art did have one very specific contextual effect: 'Against Exclusion' has proved to be a real contrast to Russia's popular and homogeneous artistic practice, and revealed the dominance of Moscow Conceptualism.

Third Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art, 25 September 2009–1 November 2009.

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## Notes

1. Jean-Hubert Martin, 'Against Exclusion' in *Third Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art 2009: Against Exclusion*, ed Nicolai Molok, Artchronika, Moscow, 2009, p 27
2. Ekaterina Degot, curator and art critic, and acknowledged by Boris Groys as one of the major specialists in Russian contemporary art (Boris Groys et al, eds, *Zurück aus der Zukunft: Osteuropäische Kulturen im Zeitalter des Postkommunismus*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2005), said that this concept was something akin to 'contemporary art for beginners', which offended the whole Moscow art scene and even Joseph Backstein (the commissioner of the Third Moscow Biennale). Ekaterina Degot, 'Biennale Diary Part Four', Openspace.ru, available online at



October 2009, Keti Chukhrov pointed out that the traditions presented as vital by Martin are perhaps dead traditions, implicitly suggesting that he was comparing kitsch to contemporary art.

4. Martin, op cit, p 27

5. AES+F, 'Défilé', on AES website, available online at <http://www.aes-group.org/defile3.asp>, retrieved 14 October 2009

6. Ibid

7. Maria Sidelnikova in an interview with Jean-Hubert Martin in *Kommersant*, no 181 (4236), 30 September 2009.

8. For a critical article on this issue see Anna Rieger-Belykh, 'Neofaschistische Bildpropaganda. Der Skandalpreis von Moskau' at TAZ.de, available online at <http://www.taz.de/1/leben/kuenste/artikel/1/der-skandalpreis-von-moskau/>, 23 December 2008, retrieved 14 October 2009.

9. Interview with Jean-Hubert Martin in *Afisha.ru* 17 September 2009, available online at <http://www.afisha.ru/article/5800/>, retrieved 14 October 2009

10. Ekaterina Degot, cited in Nicolai Molok, op cit, p 84

11. Boris Groys, 'The Dissidents of Design', in Baibakov Art Projects press release for 'Russian Povera'

12. Helen Petrovsky, 'Lieshout's Slave City or the End of Heterotopia', in *Slave City: Cradle to Cradle*, eds Sabine M Schmidt et al, Winzavod Centre for Contemporary Art, Moscow, 2009, p 60

13. Joep van Lieshout in a conversation, cited in Schmidt et al, op cit, p 29





15. Yakov Kazhdan's *Happy End* (2007), from the special project 'Ultra-New Materiality' at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, also seems to explore the compulsive ignorance of context, pointing at a tendency in advertising which makes the advertised product appear as the universal solution to any problem.

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