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Susan Jahoda, *Novosibirsk City Fathers*, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

Legally Soviet: A Conversation

Yevgeniy Fiks and Olga Kopenkina

This conversation between Moscow-born, New York-based artist Yevgeniy Fiks and curator Olga Kopenkina raises issues pertinent to Fiks's work since the early 2000s, which has been focused on the legacy of the Communist movement in the West. His practice is informed, on the one hand, by the legacy of late-Soviet visual culture and, on the other, by developments in contemporary Western, left-leaning art. Fiks's post-Soviet diasporic subjectivity is revealed in a series of projects devoted to the legacy of the Communist Party USA, which signal the "return of historical memory." Pursuing a critical reexamination of twentieth-century political history in both East and West, Fiks proposes a notion of "critical nostalgia" in stark contrast to the nostalgic melancholy of the 1990s.

Key Words: Yevgeniy Fiks, Post-Soviet Diasporic Subjectivity, Memory.

*Since 2005, Yevgeniy Fiks, a Moscow-born, New York-based artist, has pursued the legacy of Communist and Leninist ideas after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The artist has realized a number of projects, ranging from a series of paintings portraying members of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) in their New York office, to making a guide to Communist sites in New York City, to small personal actions like custom producing, through licensed USPS vendors, 39-cent stamps with the images of eight historical leaders of the CPUSA and using those as postage for his monthly bills, to mailing Lenin's book *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* to one hundred global corporations as a donation to their libraries.*

Olga Kopenkina: You have been engaged with the questions that redefine Soviet and post-Soviet identities, by addressing the Communist/Leninist heritage in your artist's practice. What does it mean to be a post-Soviet artist living in the West?

Yevgeniy Fiks: I've been trying to define the position of a post-Soviet artist living in the West by evoking a notion of *responsibility* as formative in cultural production and I've been doing it rather stubbornly—with full understanding, in fact, that responsibility and commitment are not categories of art, as Jacques Rancière has noted.¹ To me, being a post-Soviet artist in the West is a strategic and tactical position of criticality today, a criticality toward both the West and post-Soviet space equally. It is a position of “self-imposed exile” from the crude, post-Soviet, retro-capitalism, and yet, disengagement from mainstream Western contemporary currents. So, being a post-Soviet artist living in the West means being responsible for Soviet history. It means scrupulously and critically engaging the Soviet past, trying to understand the relationship between the totalitarian forms of communism and Communism as a political thinking. It's also a critical look at both the post-Soviet present and Soviet history—without discriminating, equally. It also means being responsible, if you will, for the Western leftist, especially Communist, movement in the West, its history, and especially its legacy today. And of course, being a post-Soviet artist in the West, one cannot avoid dealing with the legacy of the cold war since, at least in the context of the States, the relationship between the cold war and Communism is almost always a single narrative.

Kopenkina: Just to be precise, commitment, according to Rancière, indeed is not a category of art; however, an artist can be committed.² You are describing your commitment as the responsibility of a post-Soviet artist for the Soviet past and future of Communist ideas. That means that your art directly addresses ideologies, irrepressible by nature, rather than dealing with the actual politics of today. In this sense, can your practice provide a link to the Western left as a part of a common plan to recuperate it as a powerful ideology?

1. See Rancière (2004, 60).

2. “It can be said that an artist is committed as a person, and possibly that he is committed by his writings, his paintings, his films, which contribute to a certain type of political struggle. An artist can be committed, but what does it mean to say that his art is committed? Commitment is not a category of art” (Rancière 2004, 60).

Fiks: My appeal for such a responsibility was caused by my deep frustration with the current situation in mainstream Russian art, especially in Moscow, which, since the 1990s, has been cynicism and blunt affirmation of Russian neoliberalism. I do not necessarily mean that we should feel responsible for the communist ideology per se, but rather, for history under or in relation to communism. I'm more interested in communism and socialism as an actual experience of the Soviet bloc, rather than the history of socialism/communism in the 20th century; for history of the twentieth century is much broader than just the narrative of twentieth-century communism. I actually care very little about communism in general and about its future in particular but, as a post-Soviet artist, I feel that I must address it. What is going on in the post-Soviet space now is a total denial and repression of Soviet history. People live as if the Soviet Union had never existed. So I'm committed to the subject of Soviet history and this is my politics of today.

I feel that there is a disconnection between my work and the contemporary Western left. I understand that it's perhaps easier, or even healthier, to be in denial or to reject the Soviet experience altogether in order for the Left to move on and effectively engage in the politics of today. There is actually a whole new generation of leftist activists even in Russia today who work side by side with Western activists, as if there had been no interruption in Russia of the "natural" development of the Left. But personally, I'm unable to make this transition to the "politics of today" as such as of yet. I feel still trapped in this post-Soviet condition, unable to move on. My position is that I indeed want today's Left to recuperate itself for I believe that truly effective criticism of current situations in the East, West, and elsewhere is only possible from the Left.



Yevgeniy Fiks, *Communist Guide*, New York, installation view, 2007 Krasnoyarsk Museum Center. Courtesy of the artist.

Kopenkina: In regard to your comment that Soviet history was rejected and thrown out in the dumpster of European history, I want to remind you that the late 1990s were marked by the proliferation of individual artists' projects and exhibitions, books, films, and discussions of Soviet times: a sort of nostalgia for Eastern Europe, especially in Germany, the country that was physically divided in East and West. As Charity Scribner wrote, the feeling that something was missing from the present was at the core of those nostalgic discussions, and this is what probably relates to the state of modernity we live in now. Is it the Soviet ruins' utopian potential that makes us feel so nostalgic? Given that you now live in the West and approach the Soviet past from the perspective of Westerners, what explains your commitment to Soviet history? In other words, what is so important in the Soviet past that makes one keep on looking back?



Yevgeniy Fiks, *Dan Margolis*, 2006, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

Fiks: Nostalgia for Soviet times indeed began right after the dissolution of the Soviet bloc in the early 1990s, but this nostalgia could be described largely in terms of mourning. It was a passive and numbing nostalgia in that a lethargic state was triggered by the shock of collapse. The art informed by this was almost always the aestheticization of ruin and, as a result, tons of projects in photography and video were produced that glamorized the ruins. However, the nostalgia to which I refer is of a different kind and it entered my work after over ten years after the collapse, in the

2000s, after a relatively long post-Soviet period. It can be called “progressive nostalgia,” using the title of Viktor Misiano’s recent exhibition in Prato, or, better still, “critical nostalgia.” It’s a nostalgia that becomes a tool of critique of excesses not only in the post-Soviet present, but in the Soviet past as well. So I’d like to draw a line between the first phase of nostalgia for the Soviet era in the early 1990s, and projects that have been coming out more recently. I think now it’s much less about aestheticization of ruin, absence, or death or Utopia. I think mourning has been replaced now with anger, an anger that is directed toward ourselves—first of all, for our own weakness and lack of political agency during the Soviet period that allowed Utopia to die; for giving way to the crude and corrupt Socialism that existed during the Soviet era.

Kopenkina: But I cannot help seeing nostalgic melancholy in your portraits of members of the Communist Party USA—in their obsolete technique and compositions that you learned in Soviet schools. Does this melancholy present a perception of the history of communist movements as a “modern antiquity” we are so obsessed with now?

Fiks: I think it’s easy to confuse these days a distanced, detached approach with one of melancholia. At the same time, I do realize that when I go to the offices of the CPUSA in New York carrying a paint box and canvases, and paint from life there, I’m perhaps impersonating a conformist Soviet painter sent to New York by the All-USSR Artists’ Union on a mission to paint American communists.³ The only difference is that in my case, I was sent, metaphorically speaking, by a country that no longer exists, and not for the purpose of creating propaganda fodder but, rather, to evoke its repressed history. So if there is melancholy in this project, it’s in my evocation of the figure of a “Soviet painter” exiled from the now defunct USSR—a painter who is trying to read the present in terms provided to him by the Soviet version of modernity.

By the way, I asked people at the CPUSA headquarters if, during Soviet times, any Soviet artist was sent to paint their portraits and they said no, which was surprising to me because I would have assumed that it would have been a logical thing for the Soviet Artists’ Union to do. So it looks like I was the first one—during and after the Soviet Union. So, to your question as to how my art skills received in the Soviet Union helped me to adapt to Western conceptualism, I have to say that the irony is that my training in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Soviet art schools had apparently one purpose: to enable me to paint portraits of American communists in New York in 2006. Everything that I was taught back then felt outdated and irrelevant: the perpetuation of socialist realist aesthetics in constant appeals for the “correct reflection of everyday life,” for the “search for types” (the necessity to reveal universality in the particular) and its manic attachment to and emphasis on figuration. But for this particular project, suddenly, fifteen years later, my skills and knowledge were of use. It is as if I had been trained by my professors so that, in the post-Soviet era, I could

3. The All-USSR Artists’ Union was a creative union of Soviet artists and art critics embracing the official government aesthetic of socialist realism.

redeem the legacy of late-Soviet art. I'm realizing it with total clarity now. This is both sad and ironic.

And one more thing. When I was working on this series, I was thinking a lot about the so-called austere, or rigorous, late-Soviet painting style, a quasi-official art style that many at the time, especially the avant-gardists, believed to be a storm in a cup. It was a painting style that was much closer to officialdom than underground, and yet, it was an honest attempt to modernize late Soviet art without totally rejecting socialism. But it failed in the end. So I think in this project of the portraits of American Communists that I'm invoking this failure of late-Soviet aesthetic modernization. Here a desperate attempt to return to late-Soviet visual aesthetics equals an attempt to return to the USSR, to fix things, to see if Socialism can survive. I guess this project is about the unrealized potentiality of late-Soviet modernization, including *perestroika*.

Kopenkina: Going back to the context from which your works are derived and in which they exist—and this is the context of world (not just Western) contemporary art and modern conceptualism—I see your art in line, for example, with Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* (a reenactment of the famous miners' strike in England in 1984), or Ana Torfs's *Anatomy* (based on the 1919 case of the murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in the main courtroom at the Berlin Criminal Court), and others who refer to the past in which communist ideas and class struggle played a significant role, rather than seeing connections in your works with late-socialist paintings or Komar and Melamid's Sots art style. What do you think can be a "regime of identification" in which your works can be perceived by Western viewers? If we agree that art exists within a certain politics of aesthetics that creates the forms of communities, to which communities do you address your works?

Fiks: I realize that my constant appeals to Sots artists as formative to my work are often exaggerated and perhaps nostalgia-driven, and yet, I'm holding on to the legacy of Sots art as the only clearly articulated and conscientious political art practice in Russia in recent decades. I feel that any post-Soviet political art practice must be read in relation to Sots art. But there is no question that contemporary Western artists doing research projects, historical reenactments, and radical education projects that address the twentieth-century historical context, workers' movement, etc.—like Jeremy Deller, Susan Kelly, or Lin + Lam—are more important to my work, in fact, than Sots art.

I think my work can be understood in the context of recent developments in international conceptual and political art—an art that is left-leaning/off-center, and that is preoccupied with critical reexamination of the "return of historical memory," etc. Besides, the post-Soviet community is an inclusive one. As Susan Buck-Morss has noted, we are all post-Soviets—Easterners and Westerners alike. We all lived through the twentieth-century experience together.

New York

Reference

Rancière, J. 2004. *The politics of aesthetics: The distribution of the sensible*. Trans. G. Rockhill. New York: Continuum.



Anatoly Osmolovsky, *Bread*, installation, Winzavod, Moscow, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.