

## ON BREADS AND IDENTITY

### RUSSIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

Contemporary Russian artists comment on the term 'national identity' as quite an artificial construction. It is hardly applicable to the country, which once occupied one sixth of the world's continental territory, on which numerous and extremely diverse ethnoses - from Mongolian to Aryan to Ugro-Finnic - live. The literary translation from the English 'national identity' has been introduced into the Russian language quite recently and has not become any natural. Though, centuries long has the thought over 'the mysterious Russian soul' and 'Scythians and Asians' who we are, been occupying minds of philosophers, writers, artists of the country. What are we 'identical' to?

It becomes clearer when all those, belonging to the multitude of nationalities spread between the country's borders, are called 'Russians' once abroad. It strikes that 'Russian national identity', as any other, is the summary of certain qualities, beliefs, habits which point out to the others: he/she is not from our group. It is the signage which informs: 'From the other tribe'. As opposed to the so called 'Western' mentality, the Russian is seemingly closer to Asian, in terms of its priority of idea before matter, priority of spiritual before material, encompassing more mysticism in comparison to more rational Western. While being secularist societies, Europe and Russia show signs of some opposite processes, for instance, desecralisation of religious buildings in Western Northern Europe while restoring monasteries and building new churches and cathedrals in Russia. Russian identity refers to specific cults and genetic memories, where contemporary art takes its roots and inspiration.

'I have combined the two paradoxally uncombinable traditions – the Russian icon painting and Russian avant-garde. I consider the result to be at the crossroad of pop-art, abstract art and surrealism. The main idea is concentrated around internal symmetry. The motif of iconostasis is played with, though not directly quoted. It is more taken as a starting point. It can be, of course, spoken of a bread as a body of Christ. But I was more intrigued by the quality of symmetry as such. Bread by itself is a structure, where no particle is similar to another one. So, when you start to introduce symmetry to this structure, it results in unexpected intersections, new plots and interesting themes.'

Anatoly Osmolovsky  
on 'Bread series', 2007 - present





In his work 'Bread series' Anatoly Osmolovsky refers to the milestones of Russian culture: the Orthodox icon painting and Russian avant-garde painting. An ascendant of Byzantine, the icon painting in Russia, the highlight of which are the masterpieces by Andrey Rublev, followed strict canon regarding imagery, it's proportions, composition within an icon as well as the hierarchical group icon composition at the altar wall. A traditional icon is painted on wooden boards by monks or nuns, who have followed the ritual physical (abstinence) and spiritual (pray) purification. Osmolovsky's works, united in the series entitled 'The Breads' are carved out of wooden boards and arranged in the symmetrical hierarchical compositions, reminiscent of Orthodox altarpiece.

The sculptures are made of dark linden wood, which is carved to form a complex pattern of cavities. The drawings based on three-dimensional scans of bread slices are carved into the material by a machine. The surface of wood is treated with acids, gold and bronze paint. The carvings in the porous structure of the wood create the stunning effect of rye bread (typical Russian bread) surface. At the same time, the choice of material (wood) and the golden sheen interact with the whole historic layer of Russian icon painting. The artist has created a work, which is loaded with questions about visual culture and its value.

According to the artist, he aimed at creating an object 'between avant-garde and unknown cult'. The latter notion keeps spinning in the mind while looking at the work. It causes self-reflection. Not only the symbolism of an altarpiece is embedded in the Slavic soul, but the symbolism of bread too.



Anatoly Osmolovsky. Bread Series. Installation view at Saatchi Gallery.

## NO 'BLACK' BREAD

While Osmolovsky leaves interpretations to others, the resulted depiction of sacredness of bread in his work speaks a lot to the most Russians. Generations have been brought with the sayings: 'Bread is the head of everything'. Small children will still have to hear that playing with bread is totally unacceptable. There is not a single family on the huge country's territory, which has not lost a family member in WWII (called 'The Great War for the Motherland' in Russia). The so called 'children of War', born between 1930-s and 1940-s, still living grandparents of those 21<sup>st</sup> century modern global world people, who are now in thirties, could hardly dream about bread. It was the unreachable luxury.

Grandmothers retell how the milled old grass to eat, when their fathers left for the War. How they, sisters and brothers, aged from 3 to 10, ran to the common fields at winter night to dig the frozen soil, searching for potatoes, which could have luckily remained there from the year before. How a little girl waited in the queues for the quoted 125 gram of bread per person, and returned home in tears, because she was not able to cope with hunger and ate her portion before reaching back the house.

'Nobody is allowed to call rye bread BLACK. Bread can not be black', - my words as a child would be corrected by great grandmother in her 90-s. The yet another illustration to the object's sacredness. Black as a colour of evil. Bread as giving life is opposed death. Holy.

Genetic memory: Stalin's prison punishment for those hungry women during the War, who stole some grain from the state fields to feed their children. Eyewitnessed: the last years of the Soviet Union, deficit of food, small tickets with the name of the product and number of grams you can get after standing the whole day in the queue. Flashbacks from my own post-Soviet childhood in 1990-s when the country's economy collapsed: me and my young mother walking back from the almost empty grocery shop, holding the loaf of rye bread with the crispy layer. The bread's smell, promising that humble but divine pleasure of taste, reached the nostrils. The fingers are searching the loaf's rough surface. Pecking it little by little, digging into the porous structure under the crust. It would be half finished before we reached the apartment. The rest would be eaten with salt and onions. Bread was never thrown away, it was cut into tiny cubicles and dried in the oven. Sack with such crackers, carefully made with mother's hands, the sweetest memory of home, will accompany me, like any other child born in 1980-s, to the summer 'pioneer camp'. Unknown cult.

One sensitive observer's experience of the artwork 'Bread series' can be only described as catharsis.



Queueing for bread. Russia. 1991. Photo credit: TASS

Works from 'Bread Series' by Anatoly Osmolovsky, an ongoing project started in 2007, have been widely exhibited in Russia and abroad, at Documenta XII in Kassel and most recently in Venice at the Parallel Convergences at the Casa dei Tre Oci in Guidecca. The works have been sold through auctions in UK, USA and Russia, among which Sotheby's London, Sotheby's New York, Phillips London. Osmolovsky is represented by XL Gallery (Moscow, Russia), one of the leading contemporary art galleries in the country and Saatchi Gallery (London, UK). Artist, honoured Kandinsky Prize, curator and theorist, Osmolovsky also gives lectures



Anatoly Osmolovsky. Bread Series. Installation view at NCCA, Perm, RU



Iconostasis-like composition. Bread Series. Installation views at Documenta XII, Kassel, DE

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ARTIST

## ANATOLY OSMOLOVSKY

(Moscow, July 1, 1969 (age 46)), is a Russian visual artist, performer, theorist, editor and teacher. He resides in Moscow where he sculpts wood. Osmolovsky grounds his art in theory and supports his work with self-published writings in *Radek* (1993) and *Base* (2010) magazines and by teaching art history.

At the start of his career, the most important issues for Osmolovsky were those of power and revolution. Osmolovsky opposed the school of Moscow conceptualism.

In the mid nineties, there was a common element of male nudity and sexualized violence in the work of Moscow artists, including that of Osmolovsky. Osmolovsky was the leader of the anti-postmodernist movement, revolutionary Rival Programme NETSEZUDIK".

On the topic of post-modernism in post-Soviet Russia, he said, "The future of contemporary art is in the will to utopia, in the breakthrough into reality through a membrane of quotations, it is in sincerity and pathos."

In 2000, Osmolovsky talked about a new era of Russian art, full of fun, irresponsibility and superficiality. Viktor Misiano, curator of contemporary art, (born 1957, Moscow) in the text *Reflexive fetishism in Anatoly Osmolovsky*, explained the cause and consistency of Osmolovsky's transition from performance art and political protest to abstract and formal art.

Works

### 1990

Osmolovsky began his career in performance art with works representing protest, for example, against government institutions and the judiciary.

- *EAT (Art Territory Expropriation)* (1990 and 1992). EAT performances included, *Silent parade (Crawling)*, (performers crawled on the road from the metro Mayakovskaya to Mayakovsky monument in Moscow, symbolizing the transition from socialism to capitalism as a crawl in the mud); and *The days of knowledge*, Regina Art Gallery, Moscow ("a parody of the human chain at the White House").

### 1992

- *Leopards burst into the temple* at Regina Gallery, Moscow. The title was taken from an article by Jean Baudrillard: "The leopards burst into the temple and break the holy vessels". For Osmolovsky, the vessels represent the tradition of Russian art and conceptualism which he considers outdated and boring.
- *Ideological carrier* a project for *Flash Art* magazine. People with body parts painted red or black made gestures such as the victory sign.
- *After Post-Modernism you can only shout*, at *Multiplicity Culture. Art routes in a changing world*, Folklore Museum, Rome, and *Liaisons Dangereaux*, Centre of Contemporary Art, Moscow group presentations. Osmolovsky presented a series of 12 photographs in baroque frames depicting faces of artists who scream accompanied by the sound of each scream. Part of the work is housed in the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.
- 4th International Biennial of Istanbul.

### 1993[edit]

- *Nezesudik. Revolutionary Competitive Program*, a publishing project for Osmolovsky's magazine, *Radek*.<sup>[6][7]</sup>
- *Shame on October 7*. A performance by Osmolovsky and three others protesting the Yeltsin government. Depicted on the first cover of *Radek*.
- *Travel to Brobdingneg Land*, a reference to the island of the giants in the novel by Jonathan Swift *Gulliver's Travels*. Osmolovsky climbed on the statue of Mayakovsky in Red Square, Moscow, reciting the words of Isaac Newton: "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."
- 45th Venice Biennale in the Pavilion Aperto, curated by Achille Bonito Oliva. The work consisted of two photographs: *Chaos - My house*, depicting the chaos of the fall of the Soviet Union, and *Odd man out* depicting extreme individualism and aggression of post-Soviet Russia.

### 1995 - 1999

- *Caravanseraï of Contemporary Art*, Cultural Association Arte Nova, Pescara, curated by Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, (1995).

Osmolovsky presented *No means No*, a photographic work in which he reinterpreted the handshake.

- *Situative Action for PDS* a solo exhibition (1996) presented after Osmolovsky's period of residence at the Kunstlerhaus Bethanien (de) at the Kunstlerhaus Bethanien. Included seminars on political and social issues related to the German Socialist Party (PDS) with a display of posters with slogans and iconic graphics.
- *Barricade* (1998) in Gertsen and Nikitskaya street, Moscow (near the Kremlin). Cardboard boxes, slogans, objects and reproductions of paintings blocked the road in a tribute to the French students' riots of 1968 on the occasion of their thirtieth anniversary.
- Played guard in film of Baskova - The Green Elephant.

#### 2000 - 2003

- *Monument to the brilliant and victorious General of NATO Dr. Freud* (2000), for Manifesta III, Ljubljana, Slovenia. A sculpture made from artillery parts.
- *Inpozitsiya* (2001) for Workshop Art Moscow, Central House of Artists, Moscow. Osmolovsky presented objects such as flags and books, symbols such as the 5-pointed star and texts, some hardwood floors ripped and worked.
- 25th Bienal de Sao Paulo, Sao Paulo, Brazil, 2002.
- *Dovunque è vita (Everywhere is life)*, 50th Venice Biennale (2003). Osmolovsky presented an 84 x 60 cm poster as part of a series of 139 posters commissioned for the section, *Utopia Station* by Molly Nesbit, Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija, posted along the outer walls of the Arsenale.

#### 2004 - 2005

- *Bugs, Cuts, Details and Pieces* (2004), a sculpture series in wood and enamel for the exhibition *The Way Political Positions Turn into Form* at Stella Art Gallery, Moscow.
- *Za Czerwonym Horyzontem, Zamek Ujazdowski, Warsaw, (2004)* a group showing.
- *Dusty phrases* (2005). Osmolovsky put double-sided transparent tape on the wall in the shape of words composed horizontally. Dust accumulating on these words, making them readable. There were phrases and quotes from political and social issues, accompanied by an installation of flags, boxes, tubes, posters, and photographs. The work was recreated in 2005 for the group show, *Angels of History* at MuHKA, Antwerp.

#### 2006

- *Nathalie Sarrante Golden Fruit* (2006), solo exhibition at Contemporary City Foundation, Moscow. Osmolovsky presented a series of sculptures both hanging on the wall and placed on the floor, in a shape resembling large oranges with artificial colors and also the blue and gold colours of Orthodox churches.
- *Hardware* (2006) a solo showing at Stella Art Gallery, Moscow. This work was a series of 11 bronze sculptures of tanks representing the countries: Brazil, Britain, Germany, Israel, Italy, Russia, USA, France, South Africa and Japan. The prototype for all the tanks was the Russian Black Eagle tank. The aim was to give beauty to an object whose design was exclusively functional. It was represented at Documenta XII, Kassel, Germany in 2007.
- *Russia!*, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Bilbao, (2006), a group exhibition.
- *Modus R: Russian Formalism Today*, Newton Building, Miami, (2000), a group exhibition.

#### 2007

- Kandinsky Prize, artist of the year, Moscow.
- *Progressive Nostalgia*, Centre for Contemporary Art, Luigi Pecci, Prato.
- *Who's Got the Big Picture?*, MuHKA, Antwerp.
- *I Believe!*, Winzavod Contemporary Art Centre, Moscow.
- *History of Russian Video Art - Volume I*, Moscow Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow.
- *Urban Formalism*, Moscow Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow.
- *Thinking realism*, State Tretyakov Gallery.
- *Moscow On Geekdom*, Benaki Museum, Athens.

#### 2008

- *Bread series*. Osmolovsky often put these sculptures in wall compositions, reminding the audience of the typical iconostasis of the Russian Orthodox Church. In 2008, he exhibited *Bread series* sculptures in the solo show *New Works* at Marat Guelman Gallery, Moscow.

#### 2009 - 2012

- *Totem*, a wood carving at the third Moscow Biennale, GARAGE Center for Contemporary Culture, Moscow and the PERMM, Perm, Eastern Russia.
- *Modernikon, Contemporary Art from Russia* (2010), curated by Francesco Bonami and Irene Calderoni at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin.
- *Materia prima. Russkoe Bednoe. L'arte povera in Russia* (2011), curated by Marat Guelman, Pac, Milan.
- *Ostalgia* (2011), curated by Massimiliano Gioni with Jarrett Gregory, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York.
- *Blind hole* (2012) group showing, Thomas Brambilla Gallery, Bergamo.

#### 2013

In 2013, Osmolovsky held his first solo exhibition in a private gallery in Europe at the Thomas Brambilla Gallery in Bergamo.

- *Parallel Convergences*, Venice Biennale, Tre Oci arts centre, Giudecca, Venice