



RETROGRAD

Published on January 30, 2016 — Leave a Comment

Shadows of the present: An Interview with artist Masha Poluektova

written by RETROGRAD

Masha Poluektova is a contemporary artist based in Moscow. Her work has been featured in the city's Biennale of Contemporary Art (2015), and its Biennale for Young Artists (2014), and this week will be exhibiting in London as part of a group show entitled 'Between the Lines'. Curated by Stanislav Shuripa, the show is a

collaboration between London's Goldsmiths College and Moscow's Institute for Contemporary Art and was preceded by a summer school in Russia last year. RETROGRAD talks to her about her work and contemporary art in Russia.



'I want to live where I could be free' at the 6th Moscow Biennale.

Originally trained as an engineer, Poluektova uses a wide variety of materials in her constructions, often questioning materiality itself through thematic juxtapositions of material culture and the ephemeral. Much of her work is intentionally autobiographic, relating to her own family history; other works deal with recovering memories from forgotten or abandoned spaces. Though drawing from the Russian Conceptualist and Non-Conformist movements of

the 1980's, Poluektova addresses global and contemporary themes including migration, consumption and urban decay.

RETROGRAD: Your work draws mainly on memories, migration and the legacy of politics and injustice. Is this a reflection on the communal Russian psychology or a reminder to focus on who we are as individuals?

You start with provocative questions. In my works, firstly, I raise many problems that affect each individual and, in my opinion, many answers can be found in the legacies of the past, which recall the development of our civilization. I appeal to hopes and ideas of the Soviet past, from the October Revolution to Russian avant-garde, and bring them to a contemporary reality and invite the viewer to this ambiguous space to think together about what the future can be.



Contemporary man.

RETROGRAD: Your 2012 installation, ‘Contemporary Man’, asked members of the public to place objects inside of a transparent plastic torso. The resulting objects were a surprising mix of the traditional (coins, prices of real estate in Moscow, icons and declarations of love) as well as the modern (magazines, nail polish and iPhone instructions). What does it say about the nature of the contemporary man?

Yes, it represents the nature of contemporary man and also the time we live in. It is an artistic research project based on people’s actions and the final image entirely depended on what people would put inside to represent themselves. It

could have been beautiful, full of colourful autumn leaves, but it was full of papers, advertisements, empty cigarette boxes and the different stuff that you mentioned which people did not need anymore. It looked like this object contained and represented everything a contemporary person wants to get rid of. However, some people left sincere letters and beautiful poems, which made the image of the contemporary man much more valuable and balanced, bringing hope that there is always something very clear and strong inside us which helps us to survive.



Infinite Soviet.

You followed this with 'Forgotten in '91', a series of photographs of an abandoned summer camp representing the oversaturated dogma of education in the USSR. Is the

virtual image of the past as evoked in the project a complete shadow of its former self, or do elements of it still survive in modern Russia?

I would say this past is a shadow of present. The past exists like a shadow. It has the shape of present; the past is not obvious but it is inseparable from the present. Nothing has changed for years in that camp. I took photographs of the interiors and returned again a year after to take photographs of the same objects, placing the old photographs on them. I did the same by playing the Soviet film by Elim Klimov “Welcome, or no trespassing” on old TVs inside the same camp.

Lost in the 91'st



Being born in 1985 you may not remember the collapse of the USSR in detail, but what kind of meaning does the Soviet Union have for you, even as something you never really experienced yourself?

I did experience it myself. It existed unconsciously in me and deep in the consciousness of my nearest kin. The collapse of the USSR very much influenced my childhood; it was a very difficult time for my family. Nobody knew what to expect and we still don't. The world was changing but we still studied Soviet textbooks with a Soviet interpretation of our history.



I want to live where I could be free.

Your silk printing installation, ‘I want to live where I could be free’ (2015), was based on the words of a migrant and reflects the limited nature of memory, the transience of home and the treasure of life. Did it shock the viewer?

On first sight it seems like the viewer looks at something attractive, but when he comes closer he finds many details that might make him feel fearful. Being inside the installation, surrounded by portraits of those who struggled and understanding that they represent horrible statistics about deaths in the Mediterranean Sea, that first perception might change.



I want to live where I could be free #2: silk print.

The installation used official data from the last two years and this link to reality brings the viewer to question the practical humanitarian options and what could be done to help. Was it meant to be seen as an artistic demonstration and call for change?

Yes, you are right. The method of multiple repetition of dry statistics draws attention not just to contemporary realities, but also serves as a warning of what could be the future for

many if the attitude towards the significance of each individual, each victim of the circumstances of politics whose portrait is represented in the project, is not changed.



I want to live where I could be free #3.

‘I want to live where I could be free’ was your contribution to the 6th Moscow Biennale for contemporary art as part of the project ‘The East. Deconstruction’. How did your art contribute to this deconstruction?

What I wanted to do was to deconstruct the perception of the East as something hostile, associated with terrorism. Instead, I wanted to emphasize that people are largely victims of the political circumstances they live in. There was also a video work called ‘North attitude, East longitude’, in

which I mixed a video of Russia's East with the sound of the East abroad in order to deconstruct the perception of the East as an organic whole. But maybe it is proper to say Asia, rather than East, speaking about this project. In North attitude, East longitude' I pay attention to how even people from the European part of Russia know as little about the peculiarities of the Asian part of Russia as about other Asian countries.

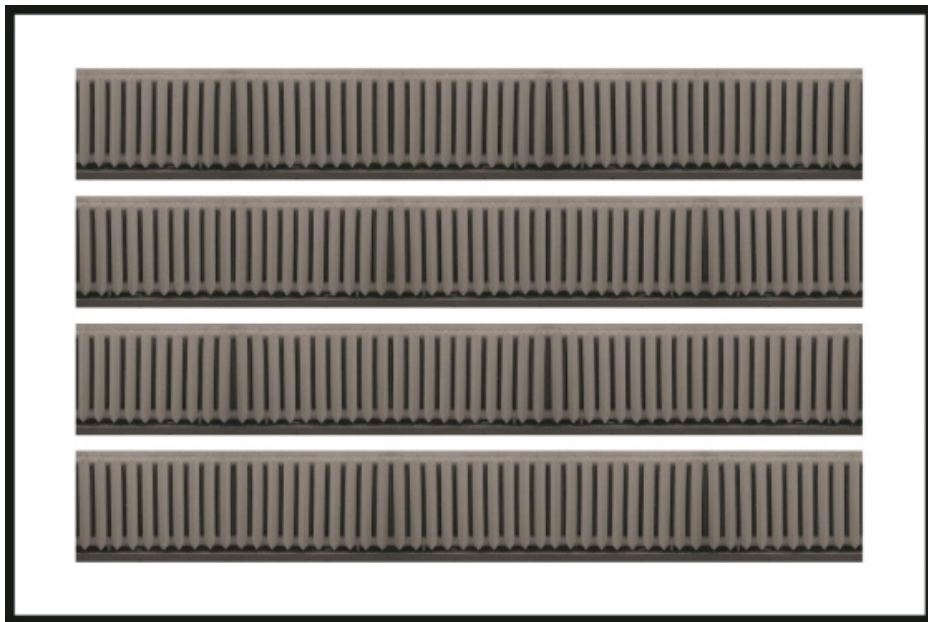
North latitude, east longitude, 2015



You are currently exhibiting at the GRAD (Gallery for Russian Art & Design) in London as part of a collaborative exhibition between Goldsmiths University and ICA Moscow. How do you find this collaboration? Are there still certain 'Eastern' and 'Western' approaches to art or do you think that the divide has been overcome?

I would say Goldsmiths and ICA have quite similar approaches in critical studies and that the concepts in our works are very important. I heard that in the other art universities of London the priorities are different.

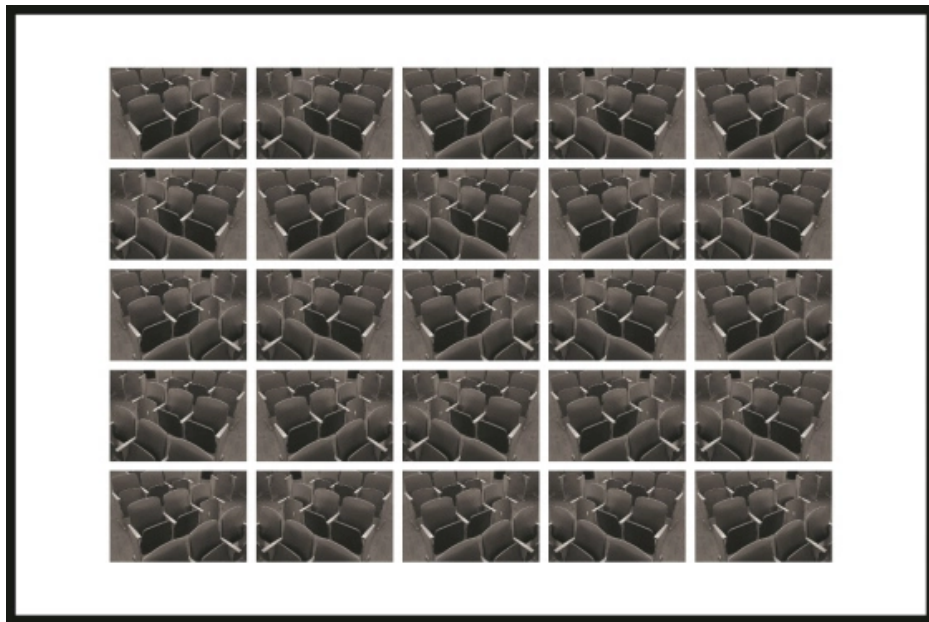
It is interesting that you always ask me about the East as I live in the West like you. Anyway, to have international experience is good for Russian artists; it expands your knowledge and understanding of how the art market works. Also there are a lot of facilities, which are not so developed in Russia. For example I had to create DIY equipment (as it was expensive) and rent a space to work on my project with silk prints. Now I have bought better equipment, which is large, but I have to find the new place as soon as possible, as in one month the building where I rent a room will be a hotel. When you start working independently to produce artwork you always have to find your own way. And this way might not be easy everywhere.



Between the lines: Radiator.

You have exhibited two photographs for 'Between the Lines', both from your series 'Infinite Soviet'. Can you tell us more about what inspired 'Radiator' and 'Cinema Seats'?

'Radiator' and 'Cinema seats' represent an infinite past that still exists in our reality. These are multiple photographs of the same things, which being placed together on one paper create an ornament. For me they represent endless Soviet time; they were taken during the residency in Russia (Academic dacha near the town Vishniy Volochek) in buildings from the 70's in which nothing has been changed. Interestingly, in UK these images have their own specific meaning, as there are similar radiators and furniture that still exist here, symbolic of the past.



Cinema seats.

The exhibition ‘Between the lines’ promotes discourse and explores what non-artists may miss, the implications, hints or allusions that are only seen if one reads between the lines. Why is it important to present this to the public?

Good question. Maybe because it is one of the problems of contemporary society: people prefer to stay away from what is really going on rather than to try to read between the lines. We disclaim responsibility for judging what happens and trust what is available for us in the mass media. And there could be different reasons why this is so: legacies of the past, fear, or simply not having time for anything in this capitalistic world. It is not so hard to find a reason to stay away from what is between, but it is possible that this

exhibition could attract someone's attention to the lines in between the lines for at least one moment.

What is your next project going to be about?

Currently I am working on several projects. One is called 'The inversion of life', the second is 'The waiting room'. In these projects I continue my research on what is between the lines and work with materials from the past, creating some new but useless objects and some uncomfortable situations. There will be some quite serious problems addressed, but represented in ironic way.

Images: Masha Poluekotva

Introduction: Alex Casper Cline

Questions: Andrea Peinhopf, Sam Hurn

Links:

Masha Poluektova's personal website

Between the Lines – exhibition at GRAD

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