

National Codes of Landscape in Russian Contemporary Art

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In contemporary Russian art, the landscape, both real and fictitious, plays an important role. In the following, I would like to introduce a number of positions relevant to the way Russian artists deal with the landscape.

1. Russian artists and groups of artists make use of diverse media and artistic practices in order to integrate the landscape into their artistic concerns and to convey their messages – painting, photography, performance, object art, land art and video.
2. Russian artists focus primarily on their native landscape, both urban and, above all, rural.
3. Present-day artists often make references to famous landscapes by artists from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to fairy tales and myths, to places famous in Russian history and to everyday life in the Soviet Union. The spectrum and the means of appropriation range from documentation through direct references and alienation to establishing ironic distance.

The aspects mentioned are clear indications of the fact that certain landscape motifs, along with their artistic rendering and interpretation, have made a considerable contribution to the formation of a cultural and political identity across various periods and up to the present day.¹⁾ Hence, before I address current works, I would like to briefly describe how national codes were constituted in Russian landscape painting.

In Russia, with its centuries-old tradition of icons, modern painting was only able to establish itself at a relatively late date. Its introduction was linked to the adoption of a modern Western model of culture in the eighteenth century.²⁾ The development of landscape painting was accompanied by the creation of important parks and gardens.³⁾ Prints played a pioneering role as they documented progress in the construction of Russia's new capital of St. Petersburg [Fig. 1]. Beginning in the last third of the eighteenth century, landscape painting was also taught by Italian and French artists at the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts for decorative purposes and the production of veduta. Within the context of Classicism and Romanticism Russian artists were initially interested in Italy primarily because of its Ancient monuments and the southern countryside, which was perceived to be ideal.⁴⁾ Only in the early nineteenth century did the Russian countryside also come into view beyond the boundaries of academic painting. The victory over Napoleon gave rise to patriotic sentiments throughout Russian society and drew attention to the native landscape. Alexei Venetsianov, who, unlike his fellow painters in Petersburg, had

withdrawn to a rural country estate, is seen as the founder of Russian national landscape painting.⁵⁾ By including colorful peasant figures in festive clothing in his works [Fig. 2], he not only imbued his atmospheric, idyllic landscapes with an allegorical character, he also created a national code.

Russian realist painters of the 1860-1890s like Alexei Savrasov, Ivan Shishkin⁶⁾ and others were responsible for creating the visual and semantic stereotypes that are still seen as codes of the Russian landscape today [Fig. 3].⁷⁾ Among them there are the Russian winter, Russia's expansive countryside, its majestic rivers, endless roads, wooden cabins and churches, the Russian forest [Fig. 4] and, especially, the Russian birch, as well as tranquil farms or courtyards and verdant cozy glades.⁸⁾ Similar motifs can, of course, also be found in other European countries, but, due to the atmosphere somewhere between deep melancholy, epic grandeur and intimate lyricism that these artists emphasized and their audience gladly accepted, these images of the landscape with their often-repeated, familiar motifs became perpetual national codes. They became a part of everyday culture. Ivan Shishkin's bears in a pine forest are used to decorate the packaging for Russian candy to this very day, to convey the promise of a "special", well-loved treat.

The paintings by the Russian-Jewish painter Isaac Levitan⁹⁾ became the very incarnation of Russian landscape painting [Fig. 5]. His paintings from the 1890s are particularly impressive due to the unique way they combine a realistic depiction of the motif with poetic depth and formal concentration. Levitan's landscape paintings became as popular in Russia as were the descriptions of nature found in the works of the novelist Ivan Turgenev and the poet Fedor Tyutchev. They are still admired to this very day as allegories of Russia's nature and have been reworked in countless variations by other artists and circulated on the mass market.

During the Soviet period, the familiar landscape motifs were updated and instrumentalized so that they could be used in paintings that conveyed the promise of a happy life [Fig. 6], one that stood a crass contradiction to the reality of most of the population's everyday lives. Colorful Impressionistic elements were added in order to create the desired effect and to evoke a sense of identification on the part of the viewer. In the 1970s, representatives of unofficial art and, particularly, concept art [Fig. 7] began to question the way the Russian, and especially the Soviet, presentation of landscape in art had become discursive and ideologically charged, and, thus, its very validity.

Alongside painting, other media and new aesthetic practices now gained importance in the artistic dialogue with the landscape. The activists of the Moscow "Collective Actions Group" formed around Andrei Monastyrsky used forms of participatory art in order to demonstrate how far they had distanced themselves from official Soviet cultural policy. As a group – or, as Soviet usage would have it, a collective – they left the city for the country, thereby immersing themselves literally in the Russian landscape.¹⁰⁾ There they staged, and still stage, actions, thereby always photographically documenting their symbolic occupation, semantic interpretation and coding of the landscape.

During their first action, in 1977, they unfurled banners with various slogans [Fig. 8]. Their goal was to undermine the Soviet culture of slogans, which were in turn a modern version of

medieval banners once used to convey divine truths. In pursuing their goal, the participants in the action made use of a proclivity for the irrational also often demonstrated by Russian poets. They replaced well-known political slogans with statements combined that were in an unusual manner, and thus rendered absurd. For example, one of the slogans at the first action stated: "I'm not complaining about anything and I like everything, in spite of the fact that I've never been here before and know nothing about these parts."¹¹⁾

The actions by the Moscow conceptualists were important for the self-perception of Russian artists. The role they played as a model to others is reflected, in the meantime, by the fact that other artists' groups in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and ever more often out in the country, now stage actions and festivals of their own in the open landscape. In 2005, this led the painters Vladimir Dubossarsky and Alexander Vinogradov to comment ironically upon this development in a large-format painting entitled *Glory to the Heroes of Conceptualism* [Fig. 9]. In the meantime, the once oppositional "Collective Actions Group" has now become a flagship of Russian cultural policy. In 2011, they were responsible for the Russian Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale, where they presented their work *Empty Zones*¹²⁾.

The series of photographs shown there, along with the central space with its installation reminiscent of prison camp bunks, presented a critical view of Russia [Fig. 10]. The installation was intended to point out, from the perspective of the artists, the many social, economic and ecological nuisances and injustices in the Soviet Union, which Russia has yet not overcome, both practically and mentally. Andrei Monastyrsky said that this installation was intended to characterize Russia as one big prison camp. And it should be kept in mind that Russia, to this day, still punishes serious crimes by internment in a prison camp and that such prison camps still exist today as real places of horror. Hence, in light of these circumstances, the organization of the Russian contribution to the last Biennale is even more interesting. As has always been the case, the Ministry for Culture of the Russian Federation was in charge and named Stella Kesaeva as the commissar of the exhibition. She, in turn, is the chairwoman of the privately run Stella Art Foundation, which financed the entire project. This connection between the state and private capital is the only way to explain how Russia was represented in Venice by a contribution that proved the compatibility of Russian art with the West, while also presenting a critical view of the country.

During the Perestroika period, Russian artists used the landscape and its representation in art intensively as a means of surveying the mental constitution of a Soviet empire in a process of transformation. Only now did they have the opportunity to visit sites that had previously been taboo and to examine living situations that were never included in the official image of the Soviet Union.

Boris Mikhailov¹³⁾, the photographer from Kharkiv, had long played the role of a Soviet flaneur (which was technically non-existent in the social spectrum of the Soviet Union). In the 1960s, he began to study everyday life without rose-colored glasses, but with an acute eye for socially and politically relevant details. Present-day Western viewers interpret the about 50 photographs from his *Salt Lake* series [Fig. 11] made in 1986, three years after the Chernobyl catastrophe, as both a

document of the absurdity and an accusation of the desolate ecological situation in the Soviet Union. The protagonists in these yellowish tinted oversized prints of black & white photographs are obviously happy to be bathing in the hot, salty wastewater from the nearby soda factory, just as if it is a common spa. Hence, Boris Mikhailov made use of a real landscape in order to create a reverse image of the Soviet social realist landscapes promising a happy life.

Erik Bulatov¹⁴⁾, one of the key artists of Russian Sots-Art, examined further the ubiquitous emblems of the Soviet Union on a meta-level. In this context, he seems to have demonstrated a prophetic gift by installing the emblems, both visual and verbal, in grandiose but unidentified spaces. In the case of the painting *Sunrise or Sunset* [Fig. 12] not the sun is hovering over a vast water surface, but the Soviet coat of arms, a hammer and a sickle on a globe depicted in the rays of the sun and framed by ears of wheat. Not only the upcoming dark clouds, but also the title of the painting *Sunrise or Sunset* shifts what appears to be triumph into a more relative context. What if the second part of the painting's title turns out to be true?

And this, as we know, is exactly what happened in 1992. The Soviet Union, an enormous multi-ethnic state, was replaced by 15 independent republics, among them the Russian Federation. In view of the dramatic loss of territory, it is only logical that a critical examination of the country's own – of Russian – history was continued. Yuri Vasiliev has been doing this since 2001. He created a multi-media project over the course of a number of years entitled *Russian Red* [Fig. 13], which has, in the meantime, been shown repeatedly, more than 50 times, in Russia and abroad, for example in Germany and Finland. In actions, installations, photos and videos, to which the landscape is also integrated, Yuri Vasiliev works with diverse stereotypes of what is quintessentially Russian.¹⁵⁾ The birch trees, mentioned at the beginning of the article, play a central role in this context¹⁶⁾, as does the color red¹⁷⁾. In Russia, especially in Russia, the color red is traditionally the color of love and beauty and of strength symbolized by blood. The Russian word *krasnyi* originally meant both “red” and “beautiful.” The connotation that results from the combination of birch trees and the color red, which covers the lower parts of the trunks, is, at any rate, macabre: a metaphor for blood-drenched Russian soil.

Nikolai Ovtchinnikov holds an opposite position with his installation *Moscow Parthenon*, shown 1997 in Moscow at the Exhibition “New Manege”. In his purified model of the famous ancient temple at the Acropolis in Athens the stone columns are replaced by trunks of birch trees. The artist understands this gesture as an example for humanization of the surrounding world and as a step for transformation and appropriation of the ancient symbol of culture into the present time and into the modern Russian culture: “I would like to wish such a building to be erected on one of the squares in Moscow. And it would be great if the visit of the Kremlin and the Parthenon would become a common tradition for just married couples.”¹⁸⁾

Nikolai Polisky has been involved in land art for roughly twenty years and consciously seeks to create projects that can only be executed in cooperation with numerous participants.¹⁹⁾ This has allowed him to continue the tradition of participatory art begun by the Moscow Conceptualists on a

broad front. One of these projects involves his snowmen²⁰⁾ [Fig. 14], which appear from year to year in different locations and always in droves. They address the topic of the proverbial Russian winter, while delighting and amusing the public at large. Each of these snowmen, just like their creators, displays individual characteristics. One winter, when the traditionally heavy snowfall failed to appear, they were displayed in a winter scene created on the Arbat in Moscow. Thus they, more or less inadvertently, also became a form of protest against climate change.

Generally, the point of departure for all of Polissky's works is his house in the village of Nikola Lenivec (Nikola the Lazy) in the Kaluga region, which he bought in 1989. In this village, the very existence of which – like so many villages in Russia – is threatened by land flight, he has been initiating social projects involving the residents of the village since 2000. In 2003, this gave rise to the annually staged “Arkhostoyanie” festival, which attracts many visitors from Russia and abroad. This festival is evidence of the fact that innovative art forms, and particularly those in which nature and the local landscape play a role, have reached in the meantime rural Russia, and have become part of its cultural self-definition.

In Nikolai Polissky's projects, universal forms and symbols often go hand in hand with those anchored in Russian tradition. An example of this is his *Firewood Tower*²¹⁾. It was built out of wooden logs in 2001 through the active participation of numerous residents of the village and its form was reminiscent of a Babylonian ziggurat. A year later, it was dismantled, and the wood was made available to the residents of the village for heating. In the “Cornucopia Project” of 2002²²⁾, one of the central principles in the current debate regarding the environment and energy, namely “sustainability,” was expressed on a symbolic level, using local resources. The *Media Tower*, which was woven out of wood in 2002, and initially attracted attention as an object, visible from a great distance, was subsequently filled with soil, in the summer of 2003, in order to plant vegetables that were later harvested [Fig. 15]. In addition, sculptural vehicles were also woven out of birch switches and mounted on horse-drawn wagons. The participants in the project took part with them and the produced vegetables in the art festival “Art-Basar” in Klyazma near Moscow. Through the sale of their own products, they were able to make a profit, and as a consequence of this, some of them went into business – for example, as artists, cooks or even culture mediators. With his installation *The Rooks have arrived* which included 40 wooden objects he presented a modern response to one of the most popular Russian landscape paintings from the last third of the 19th century.²³⁾

An unusual spectacle that made use of urban space, took place in the night of the 13th to the 14th of July 2010 in St. Petersburg.²⁴⁾ When the Neva Bridges were drawn after 1 a.m., as they usually are, a giant phallus appeared on the bridge across from the headquarters of the Federal Security Service, the FSB. It was created by the action artists who belonged to the “Voina” group. They had repeatedly caused furor with their spectacular and provocative actions aimed against the powers that be in the current Russian state. This time they used urban space in St. Petersburg in order to demonstrate their disgruntlement with the omnipotent power of the Russian secret

service. Nine activists succeeded in overcoming the guards on the bridge and then painted a 65 m long and 27 m wide white phallus on the surface of the bridge in 23 seconds. Attempts by the fire department to clean the bridge were unsuccessful and, thus, the unseemly object glowed in the spotlights until late in the night. In order to fully assess the provocative potential of the action, one should take into account that the Russian word *Chuj* is a crude term of abuse and that the action took place on Che Guevara's birthday.

In the large-format paintings by the duo of artists Vladimir Dubossarsky / Alexander Vinogradov, which previously addressed the phenomenon of the glamour in the new Russia of the 1990s, everyday reality has come to bear in recent years.²⁵⁾ Since the financial crisis, the two artists have been investigating life on the streets of Moscow armed with cameras; their preferred hunting grounds are the districts far from the city center. They then transform the often contradictory impressions that they have collected into paintings [Fig. 16] reminiscent in their pictorial language of both the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) of the 1920s and of the Realism of the 1930s in Western Europe and the Soviet Union, whereby the light captured in these paintings is particularly striking. They are interested in helping to "restore" to their domestic audience a sense of the value and authenticity of their own lives in the city, as well as expressing their criticism of the media and furthering their own cause: "It is important that every person maintains his own view of things and not that of the Internet, television or magazines. Our new project – is to get back to reality, at least to declare it, so that the viewer, after seeing the exhibition, will later look around and suddenly exclaim – that's Vinogradov and Dubossarsky!"²⁶⁾

Finally, we can conclude that Russian artists at the beginning of the twenty-first century are now engaged in an intensive dialogue with both nature and architecture in their native country, as well as with Russian landscape painting of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries [Fig. 17], the stereotypes of which are firmly anchored in collective memory and Russian mentality. Most of the works of art exhibit an affirmative tendency, in which the power and the beauty of Russia's nature are updated and reaffirmed as a possible source of identification for the viewer. Yet there are also others, in which the general validity of the stereotypes, and the hierarchy of their priority, are called into question and which use ideologically charged public spaces to express criticism of the political situation in present day Russia.

Notes

- 1) About political connotations in landscape painting and graphic in Western European art see: Martin Warnke: *Political landscape: the art history of nature*. London 1994.
- 2) Robert Auty and Dmitry Obolensky (eds.): *An introduction to Russian Art and Architecture*. Cambridge 1980; Alan Bird: *A history of Russian Painting*. Oxford 1987.
- 3) Anna Ananieva: *Russisch Grün. Eine Kulturpoetik des Gartens im Russland des langen 18. Jahrhunderts*. Bielefeld 2011.
- 4) Dmitri Sarab'janov: Artisti russi i Italia nel XIX secolo. In: *I Russi e Italia. A cura di Vittorio Strada*.

- Milano 1995, pp. 143-152.
- 5) Tatiana Alekseyeva: *Venetsianov and his School*. Leningrad 1984.
 - 6) Irina N. Shuvalova: *Ivan Shishkin: Artist of the Russian Forest*. Bournemouth & St. Petersburg 1995.
 - 7) Vitali Manin: *Russkij peysage (russ.)*. Moscow 2001; Christopher Ely: *This Meager Nature. Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia*. DeKalb 2002; *Russian Landscape*. Ed. by David Jackson and Patty Wageman. Exhibition catalogue. Groninger Museum, The National Gallery, London. Schoten 2003.
 - 8) Elisabeth Ingles: *Russia's Four Seasons. Landscape and Images of Mother Russia*. Bournemouth & St. Petersburg 1999; Vladimir A. Lenjaschin: *Jahreszeiten. Landschaft in der russischen Malerei aus der Sammlung des Russischen Museums*. Bad Breisig 2006; Felix Philipp Ingold: *Russische Wege. Geschichte, Kultur, Weltbild*. München 2007.
 - 9) Tamara Yurova: *Levitan*. Leningrad 1980; Alexei Fedorov-Davydov: *Isaac Levitan: The Mystery of Nature*. Bournemouth & St. Petersburg 1995.
 - 10) Andrej V. Monastyrskij: *Poezdki zagorod. Kollektivnye deistvija*. Vol. 1 Moscow 1998, vol. 2. Moscow 2009.
 - 11) These words came from one of Monastyrsky's first poems. Here quoted from: Ekaterina Bobrinskaia: Moscow Conceptual Performance Art in the 1970s. In: Alla Rosenfeld (Gen.ed.): *Moscow Conceptualism in Context*. Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University. Munich, Berlin, London, New York 2011, p. 160.
 - 12) Boris Groys (ed.): *Empty Zones. Andrei Monastyrsky and 'Collective Actions'*. Moscow 2011.
 - 13) Boris Mikhailov. *Time is out of joint. Fotografien 1966-2012*. Berlin 2012.
 - 14) Claudia Jolles et al.: *Erik Bulatov*. Moscow Zürich and London 1989; Erik Bulatov. *That's it*. Moscow 2006; Matthias Arndt (ed.): *Erik Bulatov. Paintings 1952-2011*. Catalogue raisonné in two volumes. Volume 1 Compiled by Kristin Rieber. With an essay by Yevgeny Barabanov. Cologne 2011.
 - 15) See: Mark Sutcliffe (ed.): *Moscow Style / Московский стиль*. London 2004, pp. 34-35; <http://www.artvladivostok.ru/2010/05/11/arka-vasilev/> Last visit: 23.06. 2012, 18.32 p.m..
 - 16) Michail Epstein: Mythen des alten Tages. Birke und Bär. In: Kopfbahnhof. Almanach 2. *Das falsche Dasein. Sowjetische Kultur im Umbruch*. Leipzig 1990, pp. 16-21.
 - 17) Ingried Brugger (Ed.): *Rot in der russischen Kunst*. Wien 1998.
 - 18) See: Georgij Nikitsch, Matthias Winzen (Ed.): *Ha kypop! Russische Kunst heute. Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden*. Köln 2004, pp. 128-129.
 - 19) <http://www.polissky.ru/en/press/english-blueprint-nikolai-polissky/> Last visit: 23.06. 2012, 20.36 p.m.
 - 20) See in: Mark Sutcliffe (Ed.): *Moscow Style / Московский стиль*. London 2004, pp. 30-31;
 - 21) <http://www.polissky.ru/en/drovnik/> Last visit: 23.06. 2012, 21.26 p.m.
 - 22) See: Georgij Nikitsch, Matthias Winzen (Ed.): *Ha kypop! Russische Kunst heute. Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden*. Köln 2004, pp. 76-79.
 - 23) See: Patricia Donegan, Anna Petrova (Ed.): *Russian Dreams...* Exhibition Catalogue. Multi Media Art Museum Moscow, Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach. Moscow 2008, pp. 36-39.
 - 24) Космический Хуй Войны на разводном мосту в Питере. In: <http://www.rave.ee/2010/06/kosmicheskij-xuj-vojni-na-razvodnom-mostu-v-pitere/> Last visit: 23.06. 2012 22.53 p.m.
 - 25) See: Виноградов и Дубосарский: *Экономически эффективные творческие единицы*. 11.05. 201. In: <http://гуро.ru/m/3077>. Last visit: 23.06.2011 p.m.
 - 26) Александр Виноградов и Владимир Дубосарский «На районе- 2» / галерея „Триумф-Метрополь“. In: <http://www.fashionista.ru/new10/2010/12/05/triumph-metropol-expo/>. Last visit: 23.06. 2012, 22.38 p.m.

