The Empire of Things.


Alexander Petlura (born 1955) is a Moscow artist. In the history of Russian alternative art he will remain, first and foremost, a collector of rubbish. He has been accumulating his phenomenal collection for the last 25 years. Today the collection numbers more than 20,000 pieces. Its major part is second-hand clothes, footwear and utensils found in city dumps, attics and cellars of abandoned houses. "I'm a collector", - says Petlura about himself, - "I collect objects which were made by subjects, not myself. After the rubbish stage, the objects go through three other stages. The first is scientific investigation. Here I am investigating whether an object could be useful. The second stage is stationary exposition, the third is theatrical action".

The artistic movement that Petlura works in, is described as "New symbolism". The "New symbolism" method consists of the former object owner transforming energy by the circumstances under which that object was found combining it with the artist's own added energy and fantasy. That is why Petlura's stylistical compositions belong to Russia's real history as much as they express Petlura's subjective view on that history. "The Empire of Things" is a truly interactive project. Having a concrete date of creation, the project continues to develop both with the audience and the author.

Wearing and using these things which become tomorrow's rubbish, we, the audience together with Petlura the artist create "The Empire of Things".

Story #1. Sun flowers.

Russia is the country of long hard winters and short summers, so it is not without reason that flowers became the symbol of the missing sun. In Russia, holiday, happiness, youth, beauty are, first and foremost, associated with sun flowers. This composition tells the story of the flower motive as used on clothing, footwear, accessories and everyday objects. This story spans over almost a century, beginning in 1905 (on the left), continuing to develop together with the collection. Its topic is change (from left to the right) of ornamentality, technology, materials and styles - from flowers weaved in cotton at the beginning of the century, printed drawings on silk, crep de Chine, chiffon to flower tracery on the popular Chinese thermos flasks or synthetic flowers - nylon, crimplene, kapron, which came into fashion in the 1960-s.

Story #2. The last tango.
"The last tango" theme stands for 'farewell to Russia', be it of white guard refugees, Russian workers chased out of the country to work in German factories during the Second World War, mass exodus from the country in the 1970-s (the two characters at the top), Jews leaving for Israel at the end of the 1980-s or the stream of people who poured into the West after Perestroika. gathering their suitcases, people dress in their evening finery and invite their friends to the restaurants to dance the last tango. The farewell with the Russia is akin to other festive rites - a wedding (the characters in the center top) or funerals. This composition talks about people who are only just preparing to leave the country and about those, who already look at Russia from outside, like a group of mad old Russian men from Brighton Beach (Russian settlement in New York).

Story #3. The Red Guard.

"The Red Guard" tells the story of the totalitarian images of Russia. On the right we see the pre-Revolutionary aristocracy awaiting their fate from the new power and a group of peasants behind their back. The group on the left symbolises the new generation, bearers of a new system of signs, whose obligatory attribute is the colour red overflowing one sixth of the globe. These new symbols, the new hierarchy and objects introduced by Soviet regime - the Red Guard - accompanied a few generations through their lives. Nothing in the new Russia stands par with the images of the Young Drummer, gymnasts, revolutionary sailors or the Pioneer (in center). The unstable decorative language of democracy is powerless before that which has left an imprint on the genetic level.

Story #4. Passions of a Spy.

One of Petlura's findings was a book published right after the 1917 Revolution. The book is entitled "Special agents training manual". The book states that one in three Soviet citizens must be a state security agent. Hence, the Soviet system assumes that one third of the USSR population will compile KGB agents and their stool pigeons. This programme, much like the construction of communism itself, was never fulfilled, but spying on and denunciation of each other noethelless became an everyday habit of the Soviet citizen, just like washing your hands. It is impossible to spot the agent, neither amongst the group of serenely happy intelligentsia (top left) nor among the lower middle class, indifferent to everything except their stomach condition and the shape of their nails (bottom left), not even among the foreign intelligence agents leaning over USSR map (bottom right). Agents did not have a 'form'. Passions of a Spy is reflected by things - the passion for small objects - pocket pistols, miniature photo cameras, listening devices.

Story #5. Dead scout.
War is the main theme in the history of 20th century Russia. The group of characters on the left shows pilots and tankmen, the military elite - subjects of national pride, heroes of films, books and songs. The group of characters on the right shows infantry oldiers of the first and second world war - eternal "gun fodder". Above daughters, having sent off their fathers to the front and widows having received new of their husbands' death. The Great Patriotic War (as the Second world war was called in the USSR) is over in 1945, but the disabled soldier (in the center of composition) remains a symbol of Russia to this day. Yesterday they were heroes - today you can meet them in any suburban train asking money for an artificial limb.

Story #6. Victory Salute.

In May 1945, to commemorate the victory over fascist Germany, the salute of victory flushed over the USSR. People went out onto the streets. They laughed, sang and loved again. Militarised during the war period, the consumer goods industry turned its attention to civil needs again. Individual dressmaking and tailoring establishments reappeared. Tailoring (in the center) became a popular profession. Bright colors and accessories in abundance, gloves and ladies handbags re-entered women's life. On ordinary days Russians prefered drab colours, but not on victory days. The country wears dresses coloured like a firework. Now, as women made up the majority of the country's population (out of the people in the group at the top, only one man sings "Victory day" - the anthem of the May Day holiday concerts) bright dresses expressed not just a joy, but were also worn as a bait to catch those men still alive.

Story #7. The corn field.

In 50-s, when the thunder of victory salutes had melted away in the sky, the routine of everyday life set in again. Ravaged by the war, the starving country revived its agriculture. To create an atmosphere of competition, the Soviet government introduced different labour movements, involving huge masses of workers, and promotional awards for those who worked above the standard or honored titles like "Champion of Communist Labour". The symbol of that era (the reign of Nikita Khruschev) is the cornfield. Khruschev chose corn to be the main crop. Cornfields covered the whole country - from Kaliningrad in the West to Vladivostok in the Far East, from the Black Earth region at the heart of Russia to the permafrost region in the North (in the center of the composition we see an old corn vendor, a typical character of the Russian provinces during those years). The clothes were mainly made of natural fibre, decorated with traditional embroidery. Handicraft and natural textures - wood, felt, linen and straw wickerwork - came into fashion.
Story #8. Friendship of nations.

Fifteen Soviet republics and hundreds of nations populating the country - this is the sad story of loss - national traits and ancient languages, forefathers' religions and land cultivated for centuries. "Friendship of nations" in the history of things - this is the story of the transformation of national costume under the influence of the so-called "fraternal nations" as well as of modern fashion and new technologies. The tradition of national dressmaking was lost. Next to the character in authentic male Adzharian dress (in the center of composition) we see an inhabitant of the Caucasus region in his new, Soviet image. On the one hand, the country produced clothes using traditional ornaments and silhouettes (group at top). On the other hand, Asian women were forced to trade in their national costume for crimplene dresses and lurex scarfs, which were mass produced by the domestic industry. Thirdly, fashionably styled dresses were made out of ancient traditional materials like fur (woman on the bottom).

Story #9. Diamonds for workers.

In 70-s, Soviet industry began to mass produce materials imitating precious metals and consumer goods that imitated luxury articles. Everything from dishes to footwear, from buttons to watches was covered in gold leaf. The worker and the peasant woman started decorating their grey clothes and boring apartments. Glitter was applied to cheap things and golden teeth became the first sign of prosperity. Hierarchy was determined by the amount of gold in the mouth amongst poor workers, and petty thieves, those who lost the race for the cheap, began to fill the prisons.

Story #10. Good-bye doves!

The beginning of 70-s was the era of the last romantics of socialism. Somewhere in far off lands, sportsmen and cosmonauts - mythological heroes - win gold medals and achieve glory for their motherland. This was the era of the most despairing projects of the century, when Soviet enthusiasts turned around rivers-beds, laid down new railway tracks leading nowhere and built new cities in the middle of the desert. Sending them to their senseless feat, the people sang - "Good-bye doves! Fly to the sun and be sure to return home soon!" In the center of the composition we see a cosmonaut surrounded by engineers resembling psychiatrists. Above - sportsmen holding the olympic fire of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games. To their right, foreign guests of the 1985 International Youth and Students Festival. Lower left, city girls in dresses showing the symbols of international friendship. above them towers the most significant and powerful of all mad communist creations: students on holiday.
Story #11. Thanks for your help.

The history of Perestroika reflected in the history of things is the history of viruses. The first virus to strike the country was the video recorder and with it karate films on videotapes. The country became infested by a chain of videostores, situated mainly in the basements of buildings and semilegal dissident clubs. The second virus was a group of second-hand stores, which appeared in the country first under the auspice of humanitarian aid, but then became a part of the commercial market. The third virus was embodied by western symbols. Local producers tried their hardest to make money by selling cheap immitations of western brands. Camel and Marlboro labels came to cover Moscow produced clothes. An avalanche of cheap western goods weighed heavily on the consciousness of the people. Children left behind their old Soviet toys in favour of Mickey-Mouse, teenagers frayed their second-hand jeans, dancing brake-dance. So, thank's for your help.

Story #12. Happy new skunk!

The only state holiday in Russia which comes close to a national carnaval a New Year. At least once in his life-time, every father puts on the costume of Ded Moroz (the Russian Santa Claus), just like every girlat least once in her life played the part of Ded Moroz's daughter, Snegurochka (in the center). Apart from New Year, every citizen of the country was taking part in the carnival of evereyday life, the costumes for which were provided by the domestic consumer good industry. Every political skunk, starting a new era with his rise to power, brought with him his own image. On the foreground of the composition are 8 political leaders of Russia - from Lenin (with the cow) to Putin (with bunny ears). Every new era is also characterised by it's own images and silhouettes in the visual sphere. For the 20-s this was the female body, birdlike and feathered. Later, the consumer goods industry, with the help of appropriate materials and models, introduced images of the squirrel-man, cat-man, duck-man, etc. Through this carnival- like manner in Russian clothing, which made people look like animals, the governmentexpressed its attutude towards its people as the working power.