

## Conference Paper

# Presentism, Public History and Contemporary Russian Art

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## Abstract

The article examines typical features of images and themes of the past as they appear in contemporary Russian art, within the context of the presentist regime of historicism and as a part of public history. This research focuses on the works by Mikhail Pavlyukevich and Olga Subbotina, as well as Chaim Sokol, all of them the artists for whom image of the present is determined by the experience of the past as an incomplete process. The analysis focuses on the factors that ground this important place that the past occupies within the space of contemporary art practices. The article explores intersections between history in public space and contemporary art. The author argues that the development of public history rooted in participatory culture, as well as de-monopolisation of expert knowledge and non-academic languages constituting the discourse on the past, shares similarities with many characteristics of contemporary art practices. In these practices the public actively participates in the artistic processes, an artist loses their status as a demiurge, while site-specific character of artistic projects necessarily rests upon the exploration of the history of place and the immersion in memory. A palimpsest, in which inseparable interpenetrating layers of the past appear through one another, becomes a metaphor both of public history and of one of the trends in contemporary art.

**Keywords:** presentism, public history, contemporary art, Mikhail Pavlyukevich, Olga Subbotina, Chaim Sokol

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## 1. Introduction

It is a paradox of contemporary art, which, by definition, should focus on the present and design the future, but instead is deeply immersed in the issues of heritage, memory and history. The language of art practices focusing on modernity is suffused with historical narratives, local heritage myths, historical imagination and images of collective memory. Equally typical for contemporary art scene are public character of art projects, civil involvement of the artists, their participation in polemics around local identity. The artists become involved in various aspects of public history; they revitalise the past. "Establishing mental distance through which the new is transformed into the ruins" – this definition by the artist Pavel Otdelnyi [1] is a triumph of presentism, and the art of many contemporary Russian artists shares this characteristic.

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This elevated status of the past can be explained by several factors. The most important of them is presentism, this contemporary regime of perceiving the past. Different formats of temporality, as well as changes in the perception of time and in the distance between historical experience and the horizon of future expectations form the nucleus of contemporary 'regime of temporality' problematised by François Hartog who believe that, "We call modernity a 'presentist' world because the present in this world has become an all-embracing category to explain everything. Over the past two decades memory has been conceptualised not only as a 'modern notion' but as a 'notion that produces modernity itself'" [2]. The French historian termed our current regime of historicity as a 'presentism', which means that today many societies chooses a particular mode of coordination between the past, the present and the future. Within this mode, the past is intertwined with the present and influence it, while the contours of future are uncertain even in the most general terms. The past is never objective, its content always depends on how exactly the people living today, engaged in interaction with each other, project their interests into the past thereby loading it with relevance. A typical feature of the contemporary perception of temporality is an expansion of the past into the present, where the past becomes part of current agenda and exists explicitly in the present (it is not a coincidence that Zigmunt Bauman's concept of 'retrotopia' has become so popular [3]).

Presentism is also marked by a specific attitude towards the past, dominated by the local and by personal history. Through this, image of the past becomes more important than the understanding of history, and the emotional 'resurrection of the past' dominates over rational arguments. It happens when both material and non-material remnants of the past exist under the condition of modern hyper-speed changes and disappear increasingly fast, heightening the value of these remnants and making them an object of public interest.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Conceptually, this analysis is based on the idea that the status of the time is historically changeable, that there are multiple temporalities. In contemporary intellectual history presentism is defined as an active attitude towards the past [4], its formatting according to the present-day agenda. On the other hand, the past becomes equally active agent of the present.

The second point in these reflections is based on the concept of public history. Since this phenomenon has multiple definitions, I will highlight its main characteristics used

for the purposes of this research. First, public history is a result of and a factor in the loss of expert monopoly over the past ('experts' here mean professional historians, archivists etc.). Second, public history implies competition, dialogue or conflict between different images of the past produced by diverse social groups within a public sphere. Third, public history is based upon active involvement of non-professionals who are striving to understand past events. Finally, public history is 'polyglossic', it speaks many languages: of text, theatre, museum exhibitions, oral history, computer games, cinema, public art and art in general [5].

### 3. Results

It seems that the importance of the past for contemporary artistic practices is tied to the increasing importance of public history. The development of public history, rooted in participatory culture, de-monopolised expert knowledge and the use of non-academic languages in the discourse on the past reflects many characteristics of contemporary art practices. The latter also immerse the public in the process of creating and interpreting artistic images, with an artist/expert ceding his/her demiurge status. The most important marker of the confluence between public history and contemporary art is the popularity of 'site-specific' strategy in art projects. Such strategy implies exploration of the history of place and work with the memory of local communities. A palimpsest in which inseparable interpenetrating layers of the past appear through one another is a metaphor both of public history and of one of the trends in contemporary art.

### 4. Discussion

In this situation, art is not a "pale shadow of the past and not a project blueprint for the future. Today artistic matter exists in the immediate 'now'" – a diagnosis coined by the artist Ivan Novikov in his recent manifesto [6].

Not all references to the past and not every artistic response to past history resonates with the feeling that the past is incomplete (a feeling characteristic for the presentism). For example, a well-known 1997 project by the artist Tatiana Antoshina, *The Museum of Woman* [7], is a series of photographs based on the classical works of art: Picasso's *Acrobat on a Ball*, Ingres's *Odalisque*, Manet's *Olympia* and other images. It is an inversion of canonic history in which men were both commissioners and consumers of artistic images. The visual transvestitism of this project is thoroughly modern. It is based on the today's agenda. In this project the ironic images based on the art of the

past appeal to the present and reflect the perspective of a potential future in which objectivation of men could determine art practices.

Another example of a project that seems to engage in the interpretation of Russian history but? in reality, is fully immersed in the present is Dmitry Gutov's and Viktor Bondarenko's *Russia for Everybody*. In the 2010s the artists offered their own vision of Russia's 'national question'. This vision unfolds within the eighty pictures-texts with names and ethnic background of Russian famous historical and cultural figures (Konstantin Tsiolkovsky: father Polish, mother Tatar; Viktor Tsoi: father Korean; Isaak Dunayevsky: Jewish, etc.) [8]. In this project history is instrumentalised and used as an argument in current political controversy. *Russia for Everybody* does not appeal to individual memory and experience and does not provoke emotional personalised remembrance. In these pictures-texts the past is complete.

A radically different approach towards the past is found in the artistic collaboration between Perm artists Mikhail Pavlyukevich and Olga Subbotina. These artists' installations present site-specific projects embracing the nearest memory horizon – the past coloured by emotions, by sense of participation, by personal experience. Their 2014 total installation/personal show titled *Chronicle of Movement* and housed by the PERMM museum of contemporary art was a perfect demonstration of their artistic system. Here intuition undoubtedly reigns over the rational arguments. The artists follow the material rather than the concept. Therefore, for these intuitivist artists a process is often more important than an idea. They strive to discover in each surface – be it a piece of cloth, a glass bottle, a rusty piece of iron, an old shoe, a boat fragment found on the shore, etc. – some cultural layer and markers of the past. Many contemporary artists (Olga and Aleksandr Florensky are a vivid example) work with the memory of materials using objects and documents that, rather than documenting the past directly, evoke associations: old window frames, pieces of metal or other everyday objects.

The art of M.Pavlyukevich and O.Subbotina forms a part of the 'new museology' discourse [9] since the majority of contemporary art projects are commissioned by major museums or exhibitions. In their very concept such works are not intended for personal spaces or private collections. Museums are changing in conjunction with the contemporary art. While previously these institutions had served as factories producing metanarratives and institutions for transmitting normative knowledge, now they are transformed into spaces used for self-determination of the communities, for interpretation of personal experience, for direct participation of the visitors in the design of museum events. Museums follow the logic of the 'affective turn' of the presentist era

and create exhibitionary spaces that stimulate affects [10]. Moving along this trajectory, they find an opportunity to talk about the present day's past.

In their series of objects titled *District (Rayon, 2016)*, M.Pavlyukevich and O.Subbotina meditate on the presence of industrial past in the contemporary cities. Historically, Perm used to carry an administrative status of the Governorate centre and, therefore, was a city of bureaucrats. However, the city's origins and the occupations of its residents (especially in the 20th century) are rooted in the conglomeration of industrial settlement, the far-flung local micro-districts that were often in conflict with each other. For generations, Kislotny, Stalinsky, Vtoraya Vyshka and other urban districts has been the territories of specific meanings, traditions and legends. In this locations, life has long ceased to be centred around industrial zones. Only the gothic views of the factory chimneys and the empty sockets of closed workshops in the works of M.Pavlyukevich and O.Subbotina remind us about this disappearing reality.

Their 2014 project *Long White Night* comprises three compositions on a fabric, which explore the language of amateur photography. The concept of this work was born from the artists' experience of seeing an online photographic archive belonging to the people they had never known. It seems that the photographs of strangers bring forward our own memories of the past, while the process of remembering resembles a process of photographic development: first we see the dim contours, blank spots and indistinct lines, and only later a clear and bright picture of the lost times emerges from a negative image. These works can and should be seen from both sides; they don't have an underside. At times, only the graphical design of the stitches at the back helps us to determine which photographs belong to the 1940s, 1960s or 1980s.

Site-specific projects of the contemporary artists assume immersion into an intellectual, spatial, material, emotional and sensory context of a space inhabited by an exhibition or by an art object. In doing so, the use of the past, of the ideas of history, local legends and mythologies, official historiography or naive local history, becomes an indispensable component of such projects.

These works also intersect with another contemporary trend. Digitalisation destroys analogue images turning them into a disappearing content. The disappearance of internet messages is a contemporary marketing trend: when content, text or image are deleted in 24 hours, its value for a user increases exponentially – thereby attracting much more visitors. However, while on social media content value is increased through artificial technologically mediated means, in mass analogue photographic heritage this disappearance process is large-scale, natural and irreversible. Contemporary artists often become the 'catchers of the disappearing content'.

The use of the past imbues every phenomenon with its own genealogy thus increasing its status and legitimising this phenomenon. Not by chance one of the most important 'turns' in the 20th-century art was an archival turn, a desire to preserve documentary evidence. This also explains the drive to archive the history of contemporary art. It can be defined as an activity that legitimizes and glorifies non-official Soviet art and relevant art in general. The Garazh Museum is an institution engaged in a large-scale activity of this kind. The curators' retrospective research exhibitions that archive the recent history of contemporary art increasingly draw attention of the public and are highly valued by the professional community. This is evidenced by the success of the 2018–2019 curatorial project *Taming the Void* that presented artist Vladimir Seleznev from Yekaterinburg.

As we see, the past becomes an indispensable mediator for talking about the present moment, it becomes a coded language of today. The past becomes a factor of the present. Within the context of presentism art has no choice but to be 'historised'. In this context, 'memorial modelling', the title of the artistic strategy of Pyotr Belyi, an artist and curator from Saint Petersburg, is highly symbolic: [11].

One of those for whom the past remains irreducibly valuable is Russian artist Chaim Sokol. Memory constitutes the main, if not the only, theme of his art. His 2017 project *Paper Memory* was a result of research and artistic reflection about and within the October Factory of Technical Papers founded in 1929. In post-Soviet period the Factory, like many other industrial facilities in Moscow, became a centre for cultural production. Things changed a lot here over the past 10 years. But the factory space itself, in its materiality, does not allow us to forget its past and the people who used to work here.

The word 'paper' means both material and document. According to the artist, this double meaning provided two intertwined lines of his work. Chaim Sokol spent three months studying the archive of the factory's HR department which preserved documents dating back to the late 1930s: employees' files, applications, decrees, verification letters. This research resulted in a series of poetic, graphic and video objects. The main characters of these works are former factory workers, and their main material is a paper that used to be produced there. Commenting on his other project, Chaim Sokol articulated a succinct definition of the presentist attitude:

Somebody said that a work of art is a SOS signal sent to the future. But we already live in the future, an inconceivable distant future which we could not even dream of fifty or one hundred years ago. Therefore, I send my work back to the past. I write to those who used to live here. And I'm waiting for an answer [12].

A visual image and a metaphor of these temporal mode can be found in another series by Chaim Sokol: his *Palimpsests* lightboxes. This Greek term means a text written on top of another text that had been erased. But even if the previous text had been washed or scraped off, its traces are still preserved – for example, on a carbon paper, as happens in this project by Chaim Sokol. Here memory and forgetting are indistinguishable, since the traces of the past are concealed and can only be revealed in the light. Inseparable interpenetrating palimpsest layers of the past appear through one another forming a metaphor both of public history and of one of the trends in contemporary art.

## 5. Conclusions

Our understanding of the past is problematised and visualised through multiple channels. In contemporary media-saturated world overloaded with visual images, practices of contemporary art often become a ‘transmission belt’ of public history. The language of contemporary art practices works with the historical narrative, local heritage myths, historical imagination and images found within the collective memory.

‘Everyone is an artist’ is one of the key principles of contemporary art formulated by Joseph Beuys. It resonates with the fundamental characteristic of public history that develops ‘history from within’, participatory culture, non-professional involvement in the work with the past. Today everyone is not only an artist but also a historian. Beuys’s motto has made it clear that everyone is capable of working with memory in a situation when large professional institutions lose their monopoly on history and when everybody has a right to the past.

Installations, performances, art objects and other non-classical art practices become triggers of memory of the past events; they introduce artistic objects and processes in the present-day polemics about the past. Contemporary state of uncertainty and multiple interpretations of the historical figures and events in professional and public history make art’s affective potential highly relevant.

Anti-commercial, process-based, site-specific projects created by artists and institutions working with local territory and local communities encourage the development of collective memory and identity through the realisation of relevant artistic projects. Such events work as the intersections between contemporary art and public history.

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