

Timur Novikov

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

My life began on 24 September 1958 at 60 Liteiny Prospekt, where I was brought from the nearby maternity hospital. I was born at the Snegirevskaya Hospital on Mayakovsky Street, only a block away from our house on Liteiny, where I have now lived for forty years. Born in the very heart of St Petersburg, I have always felt a close bond to the city. The architectural forms of Nevsky Prospekt, Zodchego Rossi Street, Palace Square and the Russian Museum perhaps inevitably influenced the development of my personality and my perception of the world. Two of my earliest memories are the sculptures at the Anichkov Bridge and on the facades of the Yeliseyev Food Emporium. My first artistic impressions are linked to the Russian Museum and one hall in particular, which contained Karl Brullov's *The Last Day of Pompeii* and Henryk Siemiradzki's *Phrine at the Festival of Poseidon at the Eleusinia*. I was struck by the sheer scale and vivacity of these and other masterpieces. By the time I had finished nursery school and was ready to go to primary school, I had already decided on my future career. From that moment on, I never looked back. The only exception was when I was thirteen and wanted to be a jet pilot. Yet even then, I wanted to be a flying artist, in the mould of Antoine de Saint-Exupery, who was both an aviator and a writer.

I started school at the age of six, a year earlier than most Soviet children. Also at the age of six, I began attending drawing classes at the House of Pioneers and Schoolchildren near my house, not far from the Cathedral of the Transfiguration of the Saviour. That was where I made my first large-scale works of painting. Right from the start, I always made extremely large pictures. My first painting was 40 x 30 inches in size and glued together from two sheets of paper. It was called *Parade on Palace Square* and depicted tanks and armoured cars with soldiers filing past the Alexander Column. As a child, my mother had taken me to military parades, as well as the Hermitage and the Russian Museum. One such event inspired my first "painting". Some of my works were even sent to an exhibition of children's drawings in India – my first international exhibition! I worked in watercolours and gouache, just like everyone did at children's studios.

As a single parent, my mother was soon obliged to send me to boarding school. I was sent to a privileged school, where they specialised in the teaching of Hindi. It was a long way from the city centre, near the Giant Cinema. Indira Ghandi and members of the Indian government once visited us. They patted our heads and we chanted "Hindi-Rusi Bhai-Bhai" – much to their delight. Many of the pupils went on to study at the prestigious Institute of International Relations. To this day, I still remain in contact with Sergei Sholokhov and Denis Yegelsky.

I was not at boarding-school for long. Two years later, after finishing the fourth grade, we moved to the far north – the island of Novaya Zemlya in the Arctic Ocean. Hoping to earn a large pension, my mother accepted a post as a typist working for the Soviet Navy. We lived there for three years. I spent my days wandering through the tundra, catching lemmings, observing polar bears from a distance, enjoying the Northern Lights, sailing down fjords on makeshift rafts and engaging in a whole host of other activities beyond the dreams of any city dweller. I think that that was when I fell in love with horizontal perspectives. Looking at my landscapes, one can clearly see my penchant for open horizons, far-off distances and small

objects.

After three years on Novaya Zemlya, we returned to Leningrad, where I returned to the first school I had attended. I was now in the eighth grade. One of my class mates was the artist Oleg Kotelnikov, who became a good friend. In 1973, the Leningrad Party boss Grigory Romanov decided to abolish the ninth and tenth grades in schools. The children were to be sent instead to technical college to learn a trade. I was forced to find a way to somehow continue my studies. The very few colleges of art were all a long way from the city centre. The only place close to home was the Pedagogical College on Mokhovaya Street, which trained teachers of art. Arriving at the college, I was told that it was moving to Moscow Prospekt in the south of the city. I decided that this was too far to travel; I had to find something else. Crossing the street, I saw that the building across the road was none other than the Chemical Industry Technical College. To my delight, I spotted a sign on the door advertising a department of varnish and paint technology.

I had no trouble enrolling at the Chemical Industry Technical College. I studied the technology of varnishes and paints, which was as close to art as I could get. My student days, however, were soon cut short. This was 1973, when hippies and long hair were in fashion in Russia. I let my hair grow down to my shoulders, and then even longer. Because of my appearance, I was forced to drop out of college in 1975. Besides the official disapproval of the staff, I also left to avoid the military department at the college, which I had to attend in lieu of army service. Attending the military department would mean having to cut my hair, something I had no desire to do. I decided that it was better to quit college than to change the way I looked.

As no other college would accept a long-haired teenager like me, I found a job as a film technician, first at the Titan Cinema and then at the Volodarsky Palace of Culture. I continued to attend the Club of Young Art Historians at the Russian Museum, which I had joined back in eighth grade. After being a member for three years, I also joined the club at the Hermitage Museum. I read books on the history of art and painted small pictures, though I had still to find my niche in art. In 1977, when I was nineteen, I met other artists for the first time. I got to know the *Letopis* group of artists and immediately understood that this was my destiny. I stopped caring about anything else and became a member of *Letopis*.

Letopis was a group of nonconformist avant-garde artists. Although they did not take part in the legendary exhibitions at the Gaz and Nevsky Palaces of Culture, they were still part of the alternative art movement of the 1970s. Every Tuesday, we used to meet up at the home of Nelly Poletayeva, where we drank tea and discussed new works of art. *Letopis* was orientated on German and Western Expressionism and the Neo-Primitivism of the Mikhail Larionov circle. Larionov particularly inspired us. Boris Koshelokhov, for example, was particularly close to Larionov and Pirosmanni.

Around 1974, the Russian Museum began to include works by avant-garde artists of the early 1920s in its permanent exhibition. The museum also held its celebrated *Self-Portraiture in Russian Art* exhibition. Thanks to the efforts and enthusiasm of Alexander Gubarev, deputy director for academic research, the Russian Museum opened several rooms of avant-garde art. Each artist was represented by one or two works. Larionov's *Fishes* appeared in the permanent exhibition.

The current claims that everything was hidden away and that no one knew anything are simply myths. It was still possible to meet members of the elder generation who recalled the first

wave of the avant-garde. Although Vladimir Sterligov had recently died, his widow Tatyana Glebova and the artist Pavel Kondratiev were still alive. Larisa Zhadova's richly illustrated monograph on the Russian avant-garde in German and a small Hungarian book on Larionov could be bought for fifty-five kopecks at the store specialising in "books from Socialist countries". Benedikt Livshits' *One-And-A-Half-Eyed Archer* and the *Sagittarius* almanac were on sale for thirty or forty roubles at the second-hand bookshop opposite my house. The members of *Letopis* devoured every scrap of information we could find about Expressionism. Kulikova published a monograph on Expressionism cleverly disguised as a criticism of avant-garde art. We artists swapped books and visited museums. I also visited private collectors like Lev Katsenelson.

We believed it was extremely important to hold our own exhibitions. I curated my first project in 1978 – the *St Cyril and St Methodius* show. I managed to secure the lease on a former church (now the property of the Georgian Patriarchate) and rented the whole building for forty roubles a month. The *Letopis* group moved into these new premises, where we saw Boris Koshelokhov off to Italy, held parties and organised our first unofficial "non-apartment" exhibition. Just when everything was ready, on 2 June 1978, we were raided by the police and the KGB. Our reaction was to hold exhibitions in parks and gardens. Each taking one or two small pictures, we would board a suburban train and travel out to a place like Solnechnoe, where we disembarked and exhibited our works right on the Gulf of Finland. We were not moved on or hassled in any way, as the police had no idea how to react to people showing their pictures on the beach. Members of the public would stop and look at the pictures, while we sat back and relaxed. One of our favourite sites was the long stone wall on the beach at Solnechnoe. We also held exhibitions at the flats of Valentin-Maria Til, Georgy Mikhailov, Yury Novikov, Tamara Valenté and Nelly Poletayeva.

These exhibitions were non-commercial acts of civil disobedience. In the late 1970s, I got to know Maria Spendiarova, a follower of Mikhail Larionov and widow of the artist Sergei Romanovich. Maria contributed to my artistic education and I often visited her in Moscow or when she came to St Petersburg. She curated a wonderful exhibition of Larionov's works at the Russian Museum in 1980. I began travelling often to Moscow, helping to strengthen the artistic ties between Moscow and Leningrad. I visited their official and unofficial exhibitions and made friends with Muscovite artists and collectors. I was lucky enough to meet such legendary names as Alisa Poret, Maria Sinyakova-Urechina, Alexandra Tyshler and the members of the *Mukhomory* group.

In 1981, various groups of artists came together in the Fellowship of Experimental Fine Art, which had a decidedly political agenda. I immediately clashed with the other members of the Fellowship of Experimental Fine Art, as I was more interested in modern art, which I had read so much about. I believed that the pictures painted by such members of the Fellowship of Experimental Fine Art as the followers of Mikhail Sidlin or Alexander Arefiev were not modern art. In 1982, Ivan Sotnikov and I formed our own group called the *New Artists*. We were joined by Yevgeny Kozlov from *Letopis*; the others joined the Fellowship of Experimental Fine Art. That same year, Alexander Gubarev and I were both sacked from the Russian Museum for "avant-gardism" (I worked in the museum boiler room).

The other members of the *New Artists* were Oleg Kotelnikov and Kirill Khazanovich. We were soon joined by Georgy Guryanov and Sergei Bugayev (Africa). We then discovered Vadim Ovchinnikov, Valery Cherkasov, Vladislav Gutsevich and Andrei Medvedev. Oleg

Kotelnikov introduced us to Yevgeny Yufit. Sergei Bugayev invited two friends from Novorossiisk – Inal Savchenkov and Andrei Kirsanov. We were also joined by the composers Igor Verichev and Valery Alakhov and the "wild" artists Oleg Maslov, Alexei Kozin and Oleg Zaika. Georgy Guryanov joined at the same time as Victor Tsoi. The lead singer in the famous Russian rock group *Kino*, Victor also painted and contributed to our exhibitions. All the members of *Kino* joined us as artists. The only exception was the lead guitarist, Yury Kasparian. All the others painted.

The *New Artists* collaborated with the Leningrad Rock Club. I myself was a member of the rock club, as the official designer of *Kino*. The *New Artists* designed the *Kino* sets and records and held exhibitions at the club. The Leningrad Rock Club was an exciting place to be at that time. Hordes of strangely dressed young people flocked to the concerts, with the police hot on their tracks. In the 1980s, long hair was out; crew cuts dyed all the colours of the rainbow were in. All the gigs were accompanied by arrests and document checks, which only added fuel to the flames.

The *New Artists* merged with the *Popular Mechanics* group, doubling up as musical showmen and set and costume designers. Sergei Kuryokhin contributed to two *New Artists* exhibitions, creating an entire installation for a show in Stockholm. We had our own exhibition hall – the Assa Gallery. Our first premises were my former communal flat, before we moved to an old apartment on Voinov Street. The Assa Gallery lasted from 1982 to 1987. We held many exhibitions, shows of parallel cinema, gigs and parties. Around 1985, the Assa Gallery was the scene for the first alternative fashion shows and rehearsals of the New Theatre, which gave public performances at the 81 Club on Chernyshev Prospekt and during *Popular Mechanics* shows. The *New Artists*, *Kino*, Natalia Pivovarova (who later fronted *Colibri*), Zhanna Aguzarova and other members of the alternative scene all performed at the New Theatre. Anything could happen during a performance. You could be covered in flour, yoghurt or arrested by the KGB (as happened once to an American diplomat).

The *New Artists* – Yevgeny Yufit, Oleg Kotelnikov, Inal Savchenkov, Oleg Maslov, Andrei Medvedev and their numerous friends and colleagues – also made parallel cinema. Scenes from this period can be seen in such films as *Teacher's Rock* and *Assa*. *Assa* can be regarded as a film of the *New Artists* group, for it includes cartoons by Oleg Kotelnikov and objects by Vadim Ovchinnikov and starred Andrei Kirsanov, Georgy Guryanov and Sergei Bugayev (Africa). Many of the interiors (Bananana Room) were designed in the *New Artists* style. The main hero is directly based on Sergei Bugayev. I also contributed to the film, both as a designer and an actor.

Our active role in Soviet cultural life in the late 1980s catapulted the *New Artists* from an underground group to an internationally known one. We were allowed to travel abroad for the first time in 1988 and began touring Sweden, Germany, Britain, France and America. This was probably the pinnacle of our career. One of the last things we did was to create our own television. *New Artists TV* was a form of pirate television that appeared in 1989. It was created by the director Yuris Lesnik, the actor, writer and artist Vladislav Mamyshev-Monro, myself (designer, producer, script-writer and sometimes even actor) and, of course, all our friends and acquaintances.

The 1990s ushered in a whole new era. I began to feel that it was time to move on, time to do something new. We dabbled in the techno movement for a while, organising the first raves and clubs with the help of disc jockeys from Europe and America. I first met DJ Westbam in Riga

in 1986 and invited him to St Petersburg in the early 1990s, which was a revolutionary step at that time. Gradually, however, I began to lose interest in all of this. The victory of mass culture dampened our ardour for it. We had been hoist by our own petard. Copycat versions of the *New Artists* began to appear. Scores of commercial artists copied our style, club promoters appeared all over the places, raves became a mass phenomenon. After returning from a trip abroad, I decided that I needed something radically new. When I had joined the Russian Museum, I remember being asked to fill out a form. One of the questions was who are your favourite artists? I remember writing Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael. Although I have always been interested in classical art, I grew particularly interested in the classics in the 1990s. In 1988, we organised the New Academy. That was the first wave of conservatism. The following year, the *New Artists* became the New Academy of All Kinds of Arts.

The New Academy of All Kinds of Arts was an alternative academy of the avant-garde. The members were all our acquaintances, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage and Brian Eno, who were awarded diplomas and membership cards. The Academy was part of the Leningrad Free University, which opened in 1988 at the Central Lecture Hall of the Knowledge Society. I was head of the department of painting, the theatrical department was headed by Boris Yukhananov, Sergei Kuryokhin was head of the department of music, and Dmitry Volchek ran the department of literature. We invited the philosophers Yury Lotman and Sergei Cherkasov and the composer Alfred Shnitke to the Academy, which we later renamed the New Academy of Fine Arts.

Georgy Guryanov and Denis Yegelsky were the first New Academicians of Fine Art. Our first action was at the Communications House of Culture. We held a disco, a party and an exhibition of works of art painted in a Neo-Academic manner. We showed my *Portrait of Georgy Guryanov*, a large self-portrait by Guryanov himself and works by Denis Yegelsky. Vladislav Mamyshev-Monro, DJ Groove and DJ Janis from Riga performed there for the first time.

Our second exhibition was curated by the critic Dunia Smirnova at the House of Scholars on Palace Embankment in 1990. The show included a *Youth and Beauty in Art* conference and a concert of ballet numbers. This was one of the first events independent of pop music. Although there had been a rave at our first exhibition, this time there was none. In 1991, when the Marble Palace still accommodated the Vladimir Lenin Museum, we held our first *Neo-Academism* exhibition, with works by Denis Yegelsky, Sergei Bugayev, Georgy Guryanov, Konstantin Goncharov and myself. The first wave of Neo-Academism can thus be dated to 1990.

The Neo-Academists did more than just hold exhibitions. We also continued to make films. Throughout the 1990s, we and friends influenced by Neo-Academism created a large number of cinema and video products. Their content was often so shocking, that the heated debate surrounding them continues to this day, even though we won many prizes. Yuris Lesnik, Olga Tobreluts, Andrius Ventslova and Victoria Ukhalova worked much in this realm of art.

We occupied the Central Lecture Hall of the Knowledge Society until 1991. This was followed by several years without any premises at all. Our adherents kept going on sheer enthusiasm alone, studying in apartments and privately. I spent much time abroad, living in New York, Berlin, Amsterdam and Paris and visiting dozens of other towns. I continued to study art on my journeys. In each town that I visited, I always attended the local museums of art and met artists. I trained under Professor Pontus Hulten at the Centre Georges Pompidou in

Paris in 1991. I never stopped looking for confederates. I discovered Pierre and Gilles in Paris, MacDermott and MacHugh in New York and Genia Scheff and the Anastasists in Berlin. The "Neo-Academic International" was born.

In 1993, we were awarded premises on Pushkin Street, where we opened our celebrated New Academy Museum. We held more than one-hundred exhibitions there. I did all I could to develop a diverse exhibition programme. Several of the foreign shows that we held – exhibitions of works by Rose Farrell and George Parkin from Australia, Karl Lagerfeld from Germany, Gianni Versace from Italy and Pierre and Gilles from France – evoked great interest in St Petersburg. These were usually the first exhibitions of these artists' works in Russia. We also held historical exhibitions, showing the watercolours of Qi BaiShi, the lithographs of Maria Sinyakova-Urechina and drawings by Alexander Samokhvalov and Alexander Ivanov. These shows merit a separate chapter all to themselves. We also held literary readings, chamber concerts, theatrical performances, receptions, parties and lectures. The lectures were read by Alexander Dugin, Sergei Anufriez and Dmitry Prigov, as well as the Academy professors. When our premises were closed down in 1998, we were awarded new rooms on Pushkin Street and at the Engineers Castle.

Like people's lifestyles, art also changed in the 1990s. The former *New Artists* began to increasingly turn their attention to rare books, the Mariinsky Theatre and the works of the Old Masters hanging in museums. Fashions also changed; canes, lorgnettes, tails, top hats, corsets, velvet dresses and *Strogii Yunosha* coats were in. Soirées of classical music replaced techno raves. The Neo-Academists invited chamber orchestras to perform at the openings of their exhibitions. We held a series of glittering premieres. The ballet *Leda and the Swan* was mounted at the Hermitage Theatre by Mariinsky soloist Sergei Vikharev and Olga Likhovskaya, with sets by Bella Matveyeva and costumes by Konstantin Goncharov. Brian Eno wrote a Neoclassical work, *Tintoretto*, and Russian composer Alexander Manotskov performed a divertissement with a string orchestra at the Festival of Neo-Academism in the Pavlovsk Palace. Manotskov's opera *Feast at the Time of a Plague* was premiered in the sets of Oleg Maslov and Victor Kuznetsov and the costumes of Konstantin Goncharov. Our poetry soirées lend a special flavour to the lives of the Neo-Academists, particularly our nocturnal gatherings in summer-houses, when Stas Makarov, Timofei Abramov and Denis Alexandrov read their poems, or at the poetry readings in the Pavlovsk Park Aviary accompanied by a harpist.

The Neo-Academists held exhibitions in the palaces and parks of St Petersburg. There was the *Secret Cult* show at the Lenin Museum, with works by Denis Yegelsky and Pierre and Gilles, as well as my own works and the photographs of Wilhelm von Gloeden from my collection. In 1994, the Marble Palace was awarded to the Russian Museum, whose department of modern art was headed by Alexander Borovsky. We continued our exhibitions there, with the *Renaissance and Resistance* show, held in collaboration with the department of modern art and curated by myself and Ekaterina Andreyeva. *Renaissance and Resistance* addressed the history of photography in the twentieth century and the preservation of classical traditions. We showed the works of Thierry Mugler, Robert Maplethorpe, Bruce Webber and other famous photographers for the first time. The success of the exhibition helped to spread the word about Neo-Academism in post-Soviet culture.

The following project was also held at the Marble Palace. This was the *Golden Donkey*, organised by Ekaterina Andreyeva with the help of the George Soros Foundation. A large

number of mostly young artists contributed to the show, which was held at the New Academy and the Marble Palace simultaneously. Yulia Strausova held another important exhibition in the Summer Garden. There was also Bella Matveyeva and Vladik Mamyshev's *Painting and Petting* exhibition at the October Revolution Museum; exhibitions of works by myself, Bella Matveyeva and Olga Tobreluts at the Museum of Ethnography; Denis Yegelsky's one-man show curated by Olesya Turkina at the Agrippina Vaganova Academy of Dance on Zodchego Rossi Street; the projection of Neo-Academic paintings onto the walls of historical buildings in the centre of St Petersburg by Yegor Ostrov on several autumn evenings; Denis Yegelsky's *Portraits of Russian Saints* project organised by the New Academy at the Museum of City Sculpture, St Alexander Nevsky Monastery; and our exhibitions at the Museum of the History of St Petersburg.

We did not confine our Neo-Academic activities to St Petersburg. We successfully held exhibitions and actions across Russia and abroad. Vincenty Dav created a special TV programme, *Demo*, to spread the word about Neo-Academism on Channel Six. Oleg Maslov and I had a New Academy radio show on Radio Port between 1997 and 1998. Olga Tobreluts opened the Art of Photography Centre. Andrei Khlobystin and I published the *Artistic Will* newspaper, which was also an artistic combat force. *Artistic Will* held a memorable action in honour of Girolamo Savonarola in May 1998. The Neo-Academists and affiliated artists brought works which no longer satisfied their high moral-aesthetic demands and burnt them on an enormous bonfire.

The 1990s are drawing to a close. Neo-Academism is currently the most exciting phenomenon in Russian culture. All other modern styles and movements are merely the tails of comets passing through other decades.

1998

Novikov T.: "Autobiography" // Timur Novikov. Catalogue. Moscow. P. 7-19, 2003