

A FEW WORDS ABOUT MYSELF

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On setting out to write this text, I decided to highlight only that which has determined and still determines my fate as an artist brought up in the heart of European culture, broken into two parts by well-known political differences. This fracture also divided my life into two nearly equal periods: the first in the USSR, from birth to emigration, and the second in the West, mainly in two central European countries: Austria and Germany.

It all started on the day of my birth, not long before the war, into the family of a Red Army officer, a professional military pilot. That is why, from my early years, I got a glimpse of all possible types of aircraft, wrecked planes, which often replaced the attributes of children's playgrounds. I remember we also had footballs made from defective weather-balloons used to measure air currents above the airfields. After our wartime wanderings, my family found itself in the city of Tula, which in many ways changed our nomadic way of life. Here I was enrolled in an elementary school crowded with overaged kids, damaged by the evils of recent times. In this provincial town ravaged by battles, I somehow became entirely involved in two pastimes: the Tula Regional Drama Theater and, two steps away from it, the club of aircraft-modeling enthusiasts. The theater's repertoire was modest, and I still remember those plays (Russian classics) in detail. The construction of airplane models (so-called schematic models) gave me a knack for handling simple tools and materials, which became very useful later, when designing models of a completely different kind.

After my father's redeployment in the summer of 1949, we wound up in the capital. This was the beginning of my life's formation. Here are its main milestones. My passion for theater introduced me to the visual arts, and with that came the desire to build something, to draw, to try to represent the models I imagined. This led me to the Moscow Art School - an elite institution (there were only two in the entire country) for specially talented children, as they used to say at the time. In 1951, at my second attempt, I became a pupil of this "greenhouse," superior in the level and scope of its education to the regular schools of those years. The school milieu itself - composed of the children of eminent people: painters, artists, writers - was out of the ordinary.

There naturally appeared a sense of chosenness, which formed the basis of the character of the future artists and their claim to be first. And the main factor of our formation was the school's address on Lacrushinsky Lane - just across the street from the State Tretyakov Gallery.

As the years of training went on, we, the students of the MAS who belonged to my circle, began to open our eyes to the problems of the dull methods of teaching painting, drawing, modeling. And just then, thanks to political changes in society, the Tretyakov Gallery gave access, at least for a small audience, to its vaults, where the treasures of the Russian Avant-garde, wiped out in the mid-1930s, were stored. Our school pass gave the senior students nearly unlimited access to this world of great discoveries of 20th century Russian culture.

It was this unexpectedly acquired opportunity that determined the development of the creativity, and the very fate, of the students of the MAS, whose sharp minds were by then filled with the lines of Nikolai Zabolotsky's poetry and Daniil Kharm's old ladies flying off the roof, while Samuel Beckett and Kafka (still forbidden) taught the curious how to extract the choice bits from the stew of surrounding reality. The last year of school revealed to us - thanks to the "street pranks" of the Russian

futurists, described by Benedikt Livshits in “The One and a Half-Eyed Archer” - a new way of applying our forces. In 1957-1958, we began to hold artistic demonstrations in the center of Moscow. Their main participants were Lev Nusberg, Evgeny Izmailov, Alexander Katin, Lenya Vlasov, and the author of this text. These demonstrations, often spontaneous, occurred, unbeknownst to us, simultaneously with the famous demonstrations of Viennese artists held at the same time. These artists, having more experience and being better equipped technically than ourselves, were able to document and describe their actions, which largely explains the timely recognition of their contribution to contemporary art in the mid-twentieth century. (Our demonstrations are described in detail in other texts.)

After graduating from the MAS, I began searching for a way to pursue my training. The choice was not easy: academic institutions, due to their ideological educational systems, seemed closed and of little interest to me. I had to search for an obscure niche, and I succeeded in finding one. It was the ceramics department of the Moscow State University of Arts and Industry (MSUAI – formerly the Stroganov School), with an inclination to monumentalism. In 1959 I passed the simple exams and became a ceramics student. I must say that, fortunately, at that time there were among the teachers of the school some remnants of VKHUTEMAS, the “Higher Art and Technical Studios.” I remember the director, N. Bykov, who left his mark in the history of avant-garde design, Professor Laktionov, who had served his time in the camps, the dissident Genrikh Ludwig, an associate of Konchalovsky, Professor Vasilyev. All of them had been quite badly hurt by life and by the pogrom which steamrolled over the avant-garde. But they were allies even so. They had something to tell and something to teach.

I had the luck of spending my years at the MSUAI, almost up until the defense of my degree, with one of them, Professor Vasilyev, under his pleasant, intelligent guidance. Vasilyev offered me a level of freedom which very few people managed to obtain in such institutions. And I used this luck to create my own style, in opposition to the aesthetics of mass-produced foreign design and its local Soviet copy, which lagged behind both in time and in means of execution.

The essence of the style born in my hands was free design, on the verge of absurd combinations of mutually exclusive elements. It was fun to see my fellow students, surprised and shocked, surrounding my desk, where in a matter of minutes a dazzling result appeared from a piece of clay. Dima Prigov, Volodya Petrov, Alla Durova are among the people I remember.

By the time of my thesis defense, director Bykov had been replaced by the architect Zakharov - a rather incompetent epigone of the academician Zholtovsky, and professor Vasilyev was no longer living. My thesis was a large-scale relief for one of the façade walls of a children’s theater in Artek. The detail of this relief, executed on the scale 1:1, stood out among the works of other graduates by the unusualness of its modelling and color. That was probably the reason for the jury’s outrage, and as a consequence, the lowest possible passing grade. However, not everyone shared this view. Thanks to the efforts of the teacher and talented artist, E.S. Lukinova, my work was later presented to the exhibition committee, collecting unusual experiments for an exhibit of young Moscow artists. The committee enthusiastically approved my work, and soon after the opening of the exhibition, an article was published in the journal DA (“Decorative Art of the USSR”) welcoming a new style in ceramics of the late 1960s.

This style attracted the attention of young architects from the 9th workshop of Mosproject, who invited me to execute a huge high relief for the movie theater being built in the town of Tushino. Thus my works – first in clay, later also in metal – began to fill the niche I had discovered, in which till then I had been able to enjoy almost total freedom of expression.

In 1969 I became a member of the Union of Artists of the USSR, which expanded the possibilities of my creative activity, by eliminating many bureaucratic obstacles of a social order.

Since the early 1970s I had been working with hard-paste porcelain, and here specifically, having studied the achievements of Kaendler, who in the 18th century created a series of large-scale multi-figure sculptures in the Meissen factories in Saxony, I achieved great results. These works became the key to my innovative discoveries in sculptural ensembles and mobiles, set in motion with water and using, as construction elements, metal bands and joints, placed outside the sculpture, yet making a united ensemble with it.

Metal progressively became the dominant material in my new projects, and the culmination of this trend was “Konstrukt” - a twenty-meter-long cable-stayed composition for the signature complex of the National Library in Ashgabat. The architect, A.R. Akhmedov (an admirer of Le Corbusier and Kenzo Tange) chose me, a relatively inexperienced sculptor, from among older and better-known colleagues, having noticed the main distinctive aspect of my artistic stance - the absence of an illustrative tendency in my work – as well as the ability to find an organic integration of the object with the architectural body and the surrounding space, and that in the correct scale.

However, the uproar produced by this sculpture, placed in the central square of the capital of a Soviet Republic by a library named after Karl Marx, provoked, along with a flood of compliments, also a number of scandals caused by the obvious contrast between the “Konstrukt” and the dominant stylistic tendencies of the monumental works of socialist realism. And only thanks to the unprecedented efforts of fellow architects and several critics from DA (L. Nevler) was it possible to defend the right of “Konstrukt” to exist. It soars up in what is now another country, near a library - a building called the Ashkhabad Parthenon - under the auspices of UNESCO.

I returned to Moscow after a year away and faced the eternal Russian question: “What is to be done?” in all its magnitude. A metal-and-light construction with a spherical symbol made of hard-paste porcelain, completed in 1976 for an administrative building in the suburbs, barely survived (it was later destroyed). I was not allowed to travel outside Russia to install four mobile-sculptures for the embassy in Mauritania, a commission thrown to me like a life-saver.

Many cultural figures left the country in the 70s. After seeing many friends leave forever to distant countries, I, together with my family, decided to take unpredictable risks – to continue our creative activity where it could be welcomed. In December 1979, after two years of hassle and losses, we, myself and my wife Alena Koneva, also an artist, together with my teenage daughter Masha and Alena’s gravely ill mother, found ourselves in a new world, where a lot had to be rebuilt from scratch. I will not describe the difficulties of initial adaptation which any displaced person like ourselves, without citizenship or means of subsistence, meets with. I’ll begin straight off with an incident that gave us a friendly wave of a hand. One year after the geographical change, I became acquainted with Kuno Knobel, a writer, a scenarist, and one of the heads of an Austrian television company. Kuno invited me and Alena to join the work of the group of artists in his Fischapark – an enormous former factory complex built in the epoch of the nineteenth century industrial revolution.

I had at my disposal a studio and a small but very necessary upkeep. And the work was at a boil. Sculptures emerged from the materials I had at hand, but the main theme, which relieved me of the burden of painful memories of our drastic change of habitat, was a black and white series of objects and canvases under the general title “Exit Documents” - among which “Stamp,” “Visa,” and “Family Portrait” stood out.

This series was shown at an exhibition entitled “Andy Warhol and Russian artists: Mikhail Roginsky, Elena Koneva and Vadim Kosmatschof.” Kuno organized it in the enormous industrial area of his Fischapark. The newspapers wrote about the exhibition. One of my works, the “Family Portrait,” was acquired by the Museum, and in addition to that, I was invited to participate in the Graz annual culture festival

Steirische Herbst - with the construction of a mobile sculpture, "Tree" (8 m, steel). Following these events I was invited to take part in a major international symposium-exhibition in Lindau (FRG) on Lake Constance. The theme was figurative sculpture in plastic. The clean page of my new life in the West thus began to gradually fill in. Among the participants of the symposium I remember the works of Niki De Saint Phalle and the German hyper-realists. My object – a white polystyrene figure with an expressively raised leg and outstretched arms and an inscription filling the whole wall – was on a decent competing level. We agreed to meet with some colleagues in Germany. The trip, which took place at the end of the summer of 1983, had an extraordinary impact on my fate. It resulted in an invitation to participate in a contest for a sculpture by the new building of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Rheinland-Pfalz region in Mainz. It was a rare chance for an emigrant, which I was honored to get and, as the Mainzer Allgemeine Zeitung wrote later, "to perform brilliantly." Later that year, I had the luck to win a contest in Cologne at the headquarters of the DEVK Insurance Company. Out of thirty projects, two were selected – one by the Venezuelan installation sculptor Jesus Rafael Soto, and my "Blitz-Lightning," which struck through the glass pyramid of the cupola into the granite square of the floor.

Plucking up our courage, we bought a house with a studio near Mainz and moved to Germany (Masha remained to finish her architecture course at the University). In these new conditions, which, in comparison with the former ones, opened up wider possibilities, I began working intensely. My participation in exhibitions and successful implementation of numerous projects through the end of the 1980s led to an offer from the regional authorities of citizenship in the Federal Republic of Germany, "for his contribution to the culture of the country." By that time Masha had become an Austrian citizen and had completed her education at the famous architecture school of London, in the class of Zaha Hadid. It was during that period that I met Stuart Veech, a student from the same school of architecture Masha studied at. In 1990 Stuart, after obtaining his diploma, came to Germany and became my assistant.

In my studio together we designed and executed a large series of works under the general title "Wandagregaten." The singular feature of their plastic design and material is reminiscent of Tatlin's counter-reliefs: almost the same material (iron, often galvanized sheet, wires and recycled turnbuckles). Proceeding from Tatlin's discoveries, these works developed the aesthetics of simple materials united by the dynamics of composition, creating over several years an independent style, which looked persuasive at the 2009 Venice Biennale.

The whole decade of the 90s was filled with the creation of large-scale sculptures in several cities in Germany and Austria. First and foremost, Mainz. Two signature works for the Central Regional Bank, LZB, in 1990: "Rotor" and "Kugelstosser" - after winning a contest. I will also note the mobile-sculpture "Window" with its four wind-moving glass panels, near the town of Linz (Austria). The irony of my last sculpture of the twentieth century is that it was executed by the same company, Treiber, from Graz, which had, twenty years earlier, created my first work in the West - "Tree" with its two rotating wind turbines.

The beginning of the new century was marked by intense work on developing the theme for projects that stage the use of solar energy. Priority undoubtedly belongs to my "Unfolding Square - the Square of Movement," a three-dimensional bridge-object connecting the "icon" of the twentieth century, K. Malevich's "Black Square," with the technologies and the context of the new century - the beginning of the third millennium.

This work, in the form of an operational prototype, was shown in 2006 at the opening of an exhibition at the Ritter Museum and was later exposed, along with graphic works, in the Landesmuseum of Lower Austria, at the exhibition "Love for Objects." Currently "The Square of Movement" is part of the museum's permanent collection. The Russian Museum in St. Petersburg showed "The Square of Movement" in photos and videos at the exhibition "Games with a Black Square." In Moscow, the

NCCA (National Center for Contemporary Arts) presented a considerable part of another project using solar energy, under the general title "Heart of the City." These projects, or rather the greater part of them, are documented in the book Trans-mission, published by the Ritter Museum with the participation of publishers Springer and DBU - the German Environmental Protection Fund.

However, a first step toward realizing the project within urban or non-urban areas was the idea of building a series of relatively small sculptures with mobile elements, integrated, as much as possible, into the surrounding landscape. Together, that is all of us, all three generations, we decided to implement such a project on land we acquired in the foothills of the Alps.

This work has taken almost ten years of our common life and creativity. Currently, alongside the house, the studio, and the warehouse, a number of sculptures appear on several levels of the slope with built-in and perpetually moving mirror elements, under the common defining name "Heliographs."

The exhibition scheduled for 2018 in the Tretyakov State Gallery will introduce the spectator of the capital to the project "The Breath of Sculpture" and, while I am preparing it, as for many of my previous ventures, I live in the hope of a friendly reception of my work in Russia, as has happened outside it's borders.