



Olga Tobreluts: *Stiob* Beauty

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As discussed in the third section of our introduction, “Beauty in the 1990s,” the last years of the twentieth century saw a number of Western art critics, with Dave Hickey foremost among them, reject the critical aesthetics of negation and distance as an elitist assault on the true nature of aesthetic form and visual pleasure. Hickey’s argument was clearly rooted in a sense of frustration over its own marginality. Institutional support for the neo-avantgarde (which Hickey describes as a panopticon-like disciplinary machine) had stripped art of its democratic potential, surrounding it with an “aura of moral isolation, gentrification, and mystification.”¹ By contrast:

The task of beauty is to enfranchise the audience and acknowledge its power—to designate a territory of shared values between the image and its beholder and then, in this territory, to advance an argument by valorizing the picture’s problematic content. Without the urgent intention of reconstructing the beholder’s view of things, the image has no reason to exist, much less be beautiful. The comfort of the familiar always bears with it the frisson of the exotic, and the effect of this conflation, ideally, is persuasive excitement—visual pleasure.²

There are several claims about beauty packed into this statement. First, one recognizes a Tolstoyan assertion of art’s infectious power to enthrall and seduce. Second, Hickey celebrates this power for a kind of democratic, community-building potential. The beautiful form does not seek to enslave us like some terrible idol; it wants only to persuade, delineating a space of dialogic exchange. Finally, Hickey rejects the hegemonic idea that art must radically separate itself from anything smacking of kitsch, the culture industry, or the society of the spectacle.³ Such arguments have always been vulnerable to the charge of elitism. Recall Clement Greenberg’s critique of Ilya Repin (and, by implication, Socialist Realism) as more attractive to a Russian peasant than Picasso or any other merchant of formal estrangement: “Repin is what the peasant wants, and nothing else but Repin. It is lucky, however, for Repin that the peasant is protected from the products of American

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¹Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty*, rev. and exp. ed. (Chicago, 2009), 14.

²*Ibid.*, 11.

³Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 6:5 (1939): 34–49; Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York, 1972); Gilles Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Fredy Perlman and Jon Supak (Detroit, 1977).

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capitalism, for he would not stand a chance next to a *Saturday Evening Post* cover by Norman Rockwell.”⁴

Hickey’s essay reflected a more general fatigue with criticality that would soon produce more developed arguments. In the world of art criticism, a notable elaboration was Johanna Drucker’s 2005 *Sweet Dreams*, which identified an increasing “complicity” with spectacular culture in contemporary art production. Drucker polemically celebrates this phenomenon, associating it with a welcome shift toward affirmation, enthusiasm, and engagement with the viewer. Meanwhile, she decries long dominant “negative keywords” (abject, subversive, transgressive, resistant, and so on) as rigidified and predictable.⁵ Similar arguments began gaining currency across the human and social sciences around the same time. One of the most influential articulations has been Bruno Latour’s 2004 article, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” in which he lambasts the critique of ideology and anti-fetishism as rooted in snobbery.⁶ Popular trends such as affect theory, the new materialism, and accelerationism all emerged from a similar weariness with strategies of negation.

In this article I test the validity of establishing a parallel between the New Academy and the concurrent beauty trend in the West. The focus of my analysis falls on Olga Tobreluts’s career between 1990 and 2003. As I argue, the similar appeal to beauty in the work of Tobreluts and the New Academy in fact partakes of both negation and affirmation while ignoring their difference, undermining the opposition between enthrallment and estrangement (or beauty and the sublime) that made the Western debate about beauty possible.

FIGURES FRIVOLOUS AND SACRED

Tobreluts’s breakthrough in Europe came with the *Sacred Figures* series, which first featured in *Heaven*, curated in 1999 by Doreet LeVitte Harten for the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf and the Tate Liverpool. The series presents a pantheon of hybrid portraits: Elvis Presley as Carpaccio’s *Young Knight in a Landscape* (1510), Leonardo di Caprio as Antonello da Messina’s *St. Sebastian* (1479), Naomi Campbell as Parmigianino’s *Antea* (1527), and so on. Several of the reworked images also include the brand labels of various fashion houses. In a review of *Heaven* for the *Observer’s* magazine insert, *Life*, which featured Tobreluts’s version of Antonello’s *Virgin Annunciate* on its cover (Kate Moss looking up from a partial text of the Calvin Klein logo), the artist was quoted as saying that “fashion and cinematography took over the theme of beauty” from art after its exile by the avant-garde. The article goes on to adopt an anti-elitist posture characteristic of the beauty trend as a whole: “If art has lost us, then the icons we have now can bring us back to it.”⁷

Harten did not appeal to the rhetoric of beauty in her curatorial statement for *Heaven*; instead, she looked to the religious sublime. Nonetheless, the show’s focus on making visible—and certainly not critiquing—a revived religiosity in secular (and spectacular) culture followed the beauty trend’s rejection of iconoclasm for something more affirmational.

⁴Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 43.

⁵Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago, 2005), xv.

⁶Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 225–48.

⁷Gaby Wood, “Idol Worship,” *Observer (Life)* (November 28, 1999): 30–33.



Indeed, Harten made it clear that *Heaven* was not interested in the “negative theology in the arts ... [that] sustains the weakness of the image, chased out of pictorial paradise.”⁸ On the contrary, the show’s focus on pop culture and the glamor of the fashion world emphasized polytheist richness, even if Harten blended it with a pre-Reformation Christian ethos as well: “Gods and their mothers, apostles and angels, devils and saints who were confined within Pandora’s box as long as the iconoclastic attitude held sway, are now free to find their apotheosis in celebrities and pop idols, aliens and heroes.”⁹

The association of *Sacred Figures* with the Western beauty trend holds true in many respects. Following Drucker’s line of argumentation, one can advance a critical reading of the series, but it will likely come across as insufficient and predictable. A comparison with Andy Warhol’s appropriation and manipulation of mass-cultural images is instructive here. Despite their engagement with spectacular forms of beauty (glamor, fame, and the like), Warhol’s works show a great critical capacity. The use of screen-printing and the production of serial images serve to critique painting and its auratic qualities. The introduction of consumer images into the gallery space sublates the opposition between high and low culture. Indeed, many of his works—especially the *Death and Disaster* series—partake less in beauty than the sublime, gesturing toward a yawning emptiness behind the image.¹⁰

One can make similar arguments about Tobreluts’s use of Photoshop to superimpose mass cultural and Renaissance portraits. One can even argue that the clash of registers in these images evokes its own kind of sublimity, as Harten suggests when she refers to the images as “transubstantiation simulacra.”¹¹ However, any appropriational critique of figurative painting or the celebrity image is clearly secondary in these works. Tobreluts is not interested in cultivating the tension between high and low, aura and mechanical reproduction. Rather, the primary gesture is to reduce such tension, flattening the images’ different layers to evoke what one might call a double enthrallment, as the lusciousness of the Renaissance image is amplified by star appeal, or, from the opposite and perhaps more pertinent perspective, as the Renaissance background elevates the celebrity face to a state of aesthetic autonomy, rescuing its beauty from the stain of commodification.

Flattening layers is, of course, a standard procedure in Photoshop, and, in many ways, the *Sacred Figures* embrace the techniques of digital collage as a way to eliminate depth, producing a homogenous visual field in which the boundaries between form and formlessness become increasingly blurred. For example, in *Young Knight in a Landscape*, Tobreluts crops the image and smudges out much of the picture’s detail, particularly the sundry animals that crowd the scene and give it depth (figs. 1–2). Replacing these details with, on the one hand, the Zoo fashion label and, on the other, several giant invertebrates, the portrait becomes both flatter, accentuating Elvis’s face, and more grotesque, making his suit of armor look like an insect’s exoskeleton. Similarly, in *St. Sebastian*, Tobreluts removes Antonello’s background details and replaces them with brand names (Fendi, Karl Lagerfeld, Thierry Mugler) and a leering Jack Nicholson (figs. 3–4). These substitutions destroy the carefully

⁸Doreet LeVitte Harten, *Heaven* (Ostfildern, 1999), 10.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰For a discussion of Warhol’s *Death and Disaster* series see Hal Foster, *Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 128–36.

¹¹Harten, *Heaven*, 187.



crafted Renaissance perspective, flattening the image to bring out a much more theatrical and artificial figure against the desolate, depopulated ground. If one again resists the temptation to perform some half-hearted critical reading of these substitutions, what emerges is a collage in which spectacular, heroic glamor mingles freely with (crawling, leering) formlessness.



FIG. 1



FIG. 2

One cannot help but wonder how seriously these images are meant to be taken. Tobreluts herself denied any play of postmodern irony in her work, arguing, for example that a comparison with Cindy Sherman's portraits (and one cannot deny the similarity, particularly with Sherman's *History Portraits* series) does not hold, since for Sherman—in Tobreluts's dismissively reductive reading—portraiture is only a pose and a joke.¹² Another explanation for these images' humor is that they are not ironic but "frivolous." This is the term that the critic Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe uses in his valorization of beauty over what he calls the "techno-sublime" of late capitalism. Drawing on Friedrich Schiller and Immanuel Kant, Gilbert-Rolfe elaborates the traditional definition of beauty as idleness and indifference, associating it with a frivolity and irresponsibility that he finds in fashion and glamor, which once again appear as repositories of beauty during the reign of the anti-aesthetic. Frivolity is fundamentally unproductive and thus also resistant to the operations of criticality: "Beauty, because it is not critical nor a product of criticism, can only undermine that regime of good sense that is criticism's search for meaning. Beauty, in being frivolous, and in that trivial

¹²See Bruce Sterling, "Art and Corruption," *Wired* 6:1 (1998): 136. Sterling was among the first Western critics to profile the New Academy, and he took a particular interest in the work of Tobreluts.



and irrelevant, is always subversive because it's always a distraction from the worthwhile, which lets us know it's worthwhile by not being beautiful."¹³



FIG. 3

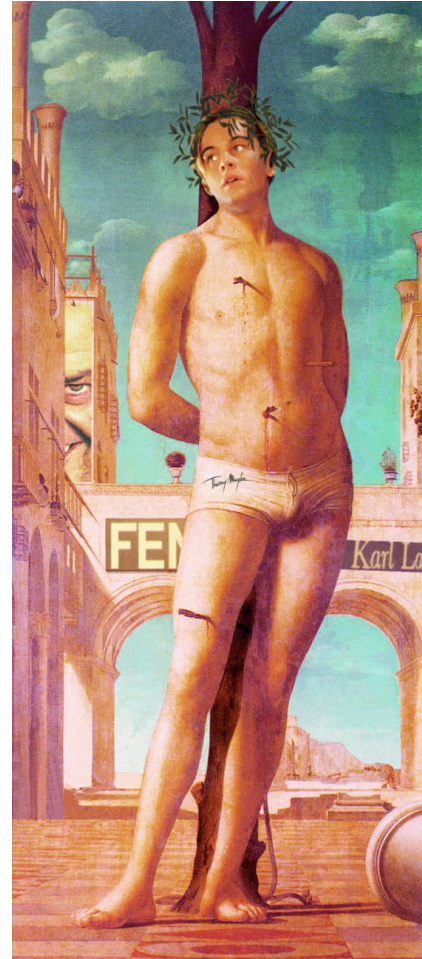


FIG. 4

Gilbert-Rolfe's paragon of irresponsible beauty is Helen of Troy, "the model's model," who "represents what will have to be displaced by war as the pursuit of justice."¹⁴ While beauty enthalls, the sublime moves us—making it transitive, productive, and thus more amenable to capitalist ideals of progress and profit. Gilbert-Rolfe also genders the Kantian opposition in an unabashedly retrograde move. Beauty is always feminine (while the sublime is androgynous) precisely because of its withdrawal of power: "The feminine, fluid and unrestrained, could provide the possibility of a secularized beauty which we know as the

¹³Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (London, 1999), 69. One should also note Susan Sontag's use of this same distinction in "Notes on Camp." For a discussion of camp and the New Academy see, in this issue, Helena Goscilo, "Maslov and Kuznetsov: Camping and Revamping Classical Scenarios."

¹⁴Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, 2, 12.



glamorous and which in effect suspends the idealisms of power—through the substitution of the thrill for the thought, arousal for contemplation—by virtue of its implicit powerlessness.”¹⁵

Tobreluts in many ways appeared as the alluring feminine face of the New Academy in the late 1990s.¹⁶ She notes that Timur Novikov’s turn toward a “new seriousness” in these years made him suspicious of the *Sacred Figures*, but he eventually accepted the series as good “advertising” for the Petersburg movement.¹⁷ Indeed, in 1998, Tobreluts produced an actual television advertisement for the New Academy, the *Manifesto of Neoacademism*, which ran on a Berlin television station. Employing a strategy not dissimilar to the *Sacred Figures*, the film animates a rowboat from Grigory Soroka’s late 1840s painting, *Fishermen*, “brands” it with the label of Neoacademism, and sends it floating through a series of other famous canvases from the Russian realist tradition. Nonetheless, frivolity is not the fundamental strategy of these works. Rather, Tobreluts produces the depthless field of her collages in a way that undermines the very distinction between frivolity and seriousness.

BEAUTY AND THE SUBLIME

Here it is necessary to take a brief excursion into the meaning of criticality and its relation to the aesthetics of the sublime. In the context of contemporary art, criticality means more than just political engagement and resistance to commodity fetishism. The old formalist principle that the artwork must lay bare the process of its own making (thus fighting the automatization of perception) leads to a Kantian investigation of the artistic medium’s conditions of possibility. Thus, Greenberg tells the story of modernist painting as a process of “entrenching itself more firmly in its area of competence.”¹⁸ Painting moves away from figuration and toward abstraction in order to emphasize the objective conditions of its material support (the flatness of the picture plane, the canvas and stretcher bars, the visual properties of color, and so on). One of the most common critical procedures involves a reduction of the image down to a dialectical tipping point. For example, Piet Mondrian’s *Plus and Minus* paintings produce an optical illusion of three-dimensional space using a simple array of two-dimensional lines and crosses of different sizes.¹⁹ The paintings situate themselves at the tipping point between figure and ground, canceling and preserving their opposition to produce a vision of vision itself.

In neo-avantgarde works from the 1960s on, this tipping point typically takes on more complex forms. Take, for example, Robert Smithson’s *Yucatan Mirror Displacements*, in

¹⁵Ibid., 72.

¹⁶According to the curatorial text of Tobreluts’s 2013 retrospective at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, Bruce Sterling referred to the artist as “Helen of Troy equipped with a computer and a video camera.” See “Olga Tobreluts: The New Mythology,” http://www.mmoma.ru/en/exhibitions/ermolaevsky/olga_tobreluts_the_new_mythology/. All URLs cited in this article were last accessed January 13, 2019.

¹⁷Olga Tobreluts, interview with the author, October 2016.

¹⁸Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4 (Chicago, 1986), 85.

¹⁹Piet Mondrian, “Pier and Ocean (Composition No. 10)” (1915), <https://www.piet-mondrian.org/pier-and-ocean.jsp>.



which the artist placed mirror arrays in various landscapes, producing images that insert the sky into the ground (dirt, plant life) below it. The criticality of this series lies, on the one hand, in a phenomenological exploration of photography (the opposition between transience and fixation) and site-specific installation (the site is made to document itself).²⁰ Yet, on the other hand, they also sublate the opposition between heaven and earth, as Smithson makes clear in his accompanying text for one of the photographs: “Dirt hung in the sultry sky. Bits of blazing cloud mixed with the ashy mass. The displacement was *in* the ground, not *on* it.”²¹ Ultimately, whether restricted to formal properties or not, the critical artwork provokes the viewer to think two contradictory thoughts at once, enduring and thus becoming conscious of their tension, escaping the dangers of illusion and enthrallment.

The work of negation in critical art has another side as well, however. For what is laid bare is not only the fundamental opposition in which the artwork and viewer are suspended, but also the place of power from which the artwork emerges. This place should not be confused with the position of the artist. Indeed, the artist typically takes on more of a martyr’s role, suffering iconoclastic violence and eschewing agency (such as expressiveness or imagination) to reveal a heterogeneous, unrepresentable power behind the art object, the power that made it. By reducing the art object to the “bare life” of its foundational tensions, the position of critical distance enables an encounter with sheer alterity: the sovereign *jouissance* that creates all images and likenesses while itself remaining forever beyond their reach. It is this aspect of the critical anti-aesthetic that leads to the more grotesque and transgressive (but always cold and distant) works of 1970s performance and body art. Jean-François Lyotard generalized this aspect of criticality in terms of the sublime, defining avant-garde art as an effort “to make seen what makes one see, and not what is visible”:

The art-lover does not experience a simple pleasure, or derive some ethical benefit from his contact with art, but expects an intensification of his conceptual and emotional capacity, an ambivalent enjoyment. Intensity is associated with an ontological dislocation. The art-object no longer bends itself to models, but tries to present the fact that there is an unrepresentable ... [bearing] witness to the power, and the privation, of the spirit.

The critical art object here acts as a veil thrown across a chasm of negativity and formlessness, bearing witness to creation as a foundational trauma. Sublime delight—as much pain as pleasure—suspends the viewer in an “agitated zone between life and death,” holding the traumatic threat at bay just enough to make its endurance possible.²²

It was partly in reaction and resistance to Lyotard’s dark vision of the avant-garde that Jacques Rancière threw his weight behind the idea of beauty in the early 2000s, calling for a different history of modern art, now rooted in Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Rancière’s central example comes from Schiller’s fifteenth letter, which describes

²⁰Robert Smithson, “Yucatan Mirror Displacements 1–9” (1969), <https://deuxieme-temps.com/2017/03/14/analyse-le-reve-henri-rousseau/smithson-9/>.

²¹Robert Smithson, “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan,” in *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, 1996), 121.

²²Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge, England, 1991), 102, 101, 100.



an encounter with the Juno Ludovisi bust, elaborating Kant's definition of aesthetic pleasure as the "free play" of our cognitive faculties. Rancière summarizes Schiller's experience of aesthetic pleasure:

The statue is "self-contained," and "dwells in itself," as befits the traits of the divinity: her "idleness," her distance from any care or duty, from any purpose or volition. ... The statue thus comes paradoxically to figure what has not been made, what was never an object of will. ... Correspondingly, the spectator who experiences the free play of the aesthetic ... enjoys ... an autonomy strictly related to a withdrawal of power. The "free appearance" stands in front of us, unapproachable, unavailable to our knowledge, our aims and desires. The subject is promised the possession of a new world by this figure that he cannot possess in any way.²³

For Rancière, this withdrawal of power—the indifference of the art object—has an egalitarian potential, which he in turn uncovers throughout the modern tradition (what he calls the aesthetic regime of the arts). Here it is important to distinguish the exuberant flatness of Tobreluts's collages from the cold, formal flatness that Greenberg makes central to modernist painting, and which Rancière similarly locates in the stylistic indifference of realist novels like *Madame Bovary*. For the aesthetic regime, flatness is a reductive strategy, bracketing the subject of representation. Instead of a panoply of images and "figures," the modernist work sends the viewer back to the medium itself, making her aware of the structural foundations of image production as such.

However, Rancière is also inverting this logic. In his description of the aesthetic regime, the work of reduction and negation is no longer primary. Indeed, the dialectical power of criticality has been transformed into something much more affirmative, fusing the autonomy of the aesthetic experience with the dream of an aesthetic state in life itself ("the possession of a new world"). The encounter with the statue as a living form at once sublates the opposition of life and art and reconceives the art of living as a task. The community must strive for a similar synthesis in its own ethical life.

It is significant that Rancière associates the beautiful with a place of inaccessible divinity just as Lyotard does with the sublime. However, the two inaccessible points are completely different. At the level of religion, Rancière takes Schiller's valorization of pagan Greece as his starting point (and ancient Greece proved essential for many works by the Petersburg Neoacademists). By contrast, Lyotard looks to Barnett Newman's abstract canvases, which the artist frequently associated with Judeo-Christian Messianism.²⁴ If the pagan statue rests idle in its power, the terrible God of monotheism shows himself through a veil. On the one hand, there is a withdrawal of power; on the other, its apophatic revelation.

Although Hickey would seem to differ from Rancière in his claim that beauty recommends a visual argument (and thus partakes of volition), the description of this process in terms of an egalitarian enthrallment is the same. The critical work of estrangement can only come after the moment of free play. Only the artwork's enthralling indifference can offer the democratic promise of a "redistribution of the sensible," to quote Rancière's

²³Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (New York, 2010), 117.

²⁴Lyotard, *Inhuman*, 82–83, 86–88.



well-known phrase, liberating the subject from fixed relations between the visible and the sayable. By contrast, sublimity depends not on enthrallment, but astonishment, as the power of radical otherness confronts the viewer. Much as Hickey sees the critical tradition as elitist, Rancière argues that an overemphasis on the sublime forecloses the emancipatory potential of art.²⁵

STIOB OCCUPATION

An association with Rancière's discussion of aesthetic autonomy—specifically, his retelling of Schiller's encounter with the Juno Ludovisi—is strongest in the *Models* series that Tobreluts completed before *Sacred Figures*. Here it is precisely Greek and Roman busts that are given the Photoshop treatment, restored to living color and branded with contemporary labels—Moschino, Versace, the polyvalent Hermes, even an Izod alligator affixed to a bust of the beautiful Antinous, whose name now becomes a brand in its own right (fig. 5).



FIG. 5

If one simply plugs Tobreluts's collages into the Western discourse on beauty, they might thus appear to be a frivolous, non-critical variant of appropriation art, enthralling before they estrange, if they are meant to estrange at all. However, as the other two articles in this cluster make clear, the series' peculiar humor should be viewed in the context of other works by Tobreluts and, indeed, by other New Academy members, in which the artists themselves occupy the position of the "star" within the flattened image. In fact, it is more precise to describe the strategy employed in these works as one of "occupation," rather than mere appropriation.

For example, in the works of Tobreluts's first solo exhibition, *Reflections of Empire*, mounted in the Russian Ethnographic

Museum in 1994, the artist appears in flowing white robes, often holding a lute, against the backdrop of historic pre-modern sites, such as the Pisa Cathedral and the Cairo Citadel. Each image includes an ornate frame produced from scanned decorative patterns. Tobreluts later animated several of the images, as in *Music Forever*, in which her hand strums the lute to a soundtrack by Sergei Kurekhin, and the leaning tower eventually falls over (as if in some Monty Python cartoon). Again, the appropriations used in these collaged images and animations are not critiqued in any way. More importantly, though, their humor—artificiality,

²⁵Rancière, *Dissensus*, 130–32.



theatricality—derives from the pathos of playful narcissism, as the artist occupies the heritage site and its temporality, restoring the ruin and its statuesque beauty to life through an anachronistic infusion of energies from the present (figs. 6 and 7).



FIG. 6



FIG. 7

This kind of theatrical narcissism was a common strategy for the New Academy. The individual artists occupied images crafted like personal brands: Oleg Maslov and Viktor Kuznetsov's classicist sex-romps, Vladislav Mamyshev's drag-queen impersonation of Marilyn Monroe, and Georgii Gur'ianov in the guise of a Socialist Realist sailor, to name just a few.²⁶ They also drew one another into different scenes, producing a positive feedback loop of mutual aggrandizement and loving objectification. For example, Tobreluts included Mamyshev in one of her *Reflections*, and she elevated Novikov and Andrei Khlobystin to the status of Russian national icons in the *Manifesto of Neoacademism*, dressing them respectively as Pushkin and Gogol. Maslov and Kuznetsov included the group's members in their least ironic visual rendition of the group's ostensible significance, *The Triumph of Homer* (1998–2000?), which, as Helena Goscilo explains in her contribution to this cluster, makes grandiose claims for the movement's status in art.

The strategy of occupation was not restricted to images; in fact, its origins no doubt lie in the former imperial capital's abandonment as a glorious ruin during the Soviet collapse, free to be seized by the young artists. This aspect of the Leningrad art scene can be seen most clearly in the series of exhibits curated by Ivan Movsesian on the raised Palace Bridge between 1990 and 1992 and the related film, *The Exoticism of the Classical*, in which Mamyshev frolics around various architectural monuments wearing a satin nightdress, jazz-feather wings, and a flower garland (fig. 8). Tobreluts enacted her own performative occupation of a Leningrad site in 1990, striking poses alongside the antique statues of the Summer Garden wearing her signature blue wig and black velvet page's costume (fig. 9). The concept of the action, titled *Blue Hair*, was to reverse the gender dynamic of the Bluebeard tale, as Tobreluts approached statues representing an ideal masculine beauty

²⁶See, in this issue, Goscilo, "Maslov and Kuznetsov," and Julie A. Cassiday, "Vladislav Mamyshev-Monro, Frog-Princess of Neoacademism"; and Maria Engström, "Apollo against Black Square: Conservative Futurism in Contemporary Russia," in *International Yearbook of Futurism Studies*, vol. 6, ed. Günter Berghaus (Berlin, 2016), 337–41.



and captivated them with her indomitable feminine energy. It is not difficult to see how such performances fed into the practice of seizing various media and spaces—Mamyshev and Yuris Lesnik's *Pirate Television*, Novikov and Khlobystin publishing *Artistic Will* as an insert for *At the Bottom*, a newspaper benefiting the homeless, or basing the New Academy in the Pushkinskaya 10 squat or the Navicula Artis gallery in the Palace of Labor. The result was the artists creating alternative institutions over which they had total control.



FIG. 8



FIG. 9

The humorous aspect of these practices of occupation cannot be defined in terms of enthrallment or estrangement, beauty or the sublime, affirmation or negation. Rather, making sense of them requires the idiosyncratic, local concept of *stiob*, which does not critically suspend these distinctions to maximize their dialectical tension but simply ignores them. Andrei Fomenko defined the peculiar late-Soviet phenomenon of *stiob* as

a variety of humorous discourse; *to practice stiob (stebat')* means to talk nonsense with a serious face, to advance a coherent argument about completely comical subjects. *Stiob* assumes a grin of participation (*usmeshka souchastiia*), establishing a closed-off community of people 'in the know,' which remains



public at the same time. Thus *stiob* does not so much possess a critical function as a performative one.²⁷

For the New Academy, classicism is the subject of *stiob*, the site of occupation (“overidentification”), and not the performative strategy.²⁸ The energy of their *stiob* performances is always quite removed from the free play of beautiful forms. Rather, they operate in something similar to Lyotard’s description of the sublime as a zone of agitation between life and death, only now this zone depends not on astonishment before the unrepresentable other but on the discovery of a heterogeneous power within the empty self as it roams the derelict empire and occupies its grand abandoned spaces. In this sense, the narcissism of the New Academy in fact derives from a collective practice of desubjectivization.

Despite the more affirmational image she cultivated abroad, the sublime energies of the New Academy’s practice were in no way alien to Tobreluts—particularly in her use of *stiob* to collapse the classical body and the grotesque, form and formlessness. One finds such a compression in the collective New Academy project *Passiones Luci* (curated by Ekaterina Andreeva in 1995), in which Tobreluts contributed the digital collage techniques she developed in her *Reflections of Empire* to help create a series of *tableau-vivant* illustrations to Apuleius’s *Golden Ass*. Alongside Mikhail Kuzmin’s translation of the text, famous for its bawdiness and violence, the reader finds images of striking theatrical beauty, as the models—dressed in Konstantin Goncharov’s remarkable costumes—pose inside the false depth of Tobreluts’s appropriated imagery. In Book 1, for example, two witches slit the throat and tear out the heart of a traveler and urinate on his terrified friend. None of this grotesquerie appears in the illustration, however, which aspires to a voluptuous beauty cast in delicate homoerotic tones (fig. 10). Even when the images approach something more plainly comical—as in the illustration to Book 8, which features Maslov and Kuznetsov as the catamite priests of a Syrian goddess—the grotesque is still left in the text (fig. 11). In Apuleius, the priests much more blatantly engage in the “vile filth” of homosexual orgies, shocking both Lucian and the townspeople.²⁹ While Tobreluts hints at the text’s aggressive judgment of the catamites (an anachronistic fighter jet seems about to bomb the priests), the image remains a theatrically “harmonious” stylization that is hardly unchaste.

Another striking example of such blissful ignorance of the divide between form and formlessness comes in the final scene from the *Manifesto*, in which Tobreluts slowly superimposes statuary images of Pushkin and Gogol over the costumed Novikov and Khlobystin. As the immortal countenances appear, Novikov’s bright eyes and wry grin fade away, while Khlobystin loses his more sinister gaze and his absurd prosthetic nose (fig. 12). One might argue that there is a moment of critique here, revealing the unruly, theatrical life of the New Academy beneath the classicist surface, but the intention of the

²⁷Andrei Fomenko, *Arkhaisty, oni zhe novatory* (Moscow, 2007), 24. For a more detailed definition of *stiob* see the introduction to this cluster.

²⁸Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2006), 250. See also Slavoj Žižek, “Why are Laibach and the *Neue Slowenische Kunst* not Fascists?” (1993), reprinted in *Slavoj Žižek: The Universal Exception*, ed. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London, 2006), 63–66.

²⁹*Passiones Luci: Katalog vystavki* (St. Petersburg, 1995), 113.



scene is clearly different. The film's overall strategy of *stiob* occupation flattens the distinction between these two layers, ignoring it at the level of the performative enunciation, which presents the New Academy with unflinching seriousness as a revival of beauty, form, and tradition.



FIG. 10



FIG. 11



FIG. 12

Finally, in Tobreluts's 1994 film, *Woe from Wit*—based on the classic Griboedov satire in another *stiob* occupation of the Russian literary tradition—nearly half of the film is devoted to the play's grotesque frame: the sexual advances made toward the chambermaid, Liza, first by Famusov in the play's opening scene and then by Molchalin in its climax.³⁰

³⁰See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wjk946wClig>.



While for Griboedov this frame exposes the seedy underbelly and hypocrisy of the Moscow gentry, Tobreluts instead revels in the ribaldry, casting Khlobystin in drag as Liza and reordering the plot so that Molchalin's groping directly follows Famusov's. At the same time, the film also introduces a loftier image of love, wholly absent from the original play, suggesting that Chatskii (Novikov) and Sofiia (Irena Kuksenaite) in fact will marry.

The surface reading of the film would seem to indict Molchalin as a representative of lukewarm, "middle-style" eroticism, since he makes his play for Liza in terms of love, unlike Famusov, who simply tries to rape her. In the final scenes, Chatskii and Sofiia dance with the image of William-Adolphe Bourguereau's *Cupid and Psyche* decorating the walls behind them, and a folksier, more exuberant dance by Famusov and Liza follows, now in a sepia filter with the emblem of lofty love removed. Molchalin's desire, meanwhile, is left unrequited, and he is the one who speaks Chatskii's final lines from the play, announcing his departure from Moscow to find a "corner for his hurt feelings."³¹ Most significant here, however, is the film's equipollent enjoyment of the two models of desire, as if no evaluative distinction divides them. Indeed, during the scene in which Chatskii and Sofiia proclaim their love for one another, a small statue of Venus appears between them, animated so that it oscillates between revealing its exposed breasts and its buttocks. Molchalin's hypocritical conflation is thus again replaced by a flattened layering of high and low, the beautiful and the grotesque. The opposition is not lost; it is simply ignored at the level of enunciation. A similar effect is produced by other animation elements in the film, in which images of nature's overabundance—bizarre sea plants, flocks of birds, bushes of flowers—appear behind the action on the walls and through the windows and doorways. Here classical form and sublime formlessness are again juxtaposed without any sense of tension between them. The flatness of these digital collages is not reductive but explosive, unleashing a messy and promiscuous surfeit of imagery.

THE END OF *STIOB*

The anti-aesthetic of estrangement—whether as formal reduction, sublime abstraction, or grotesque transgression—is defined by a dialectical process of negation, shattering fetishes and illusions to touch the bare, inhuman power from which all forms and images proceed. But, despite its affirmational ethos, the aesthetic of enthralling beauty is no less dialectical. Only now estrangement follows enthrallment as a secondary, withheld moment of force, which can only be actualized in a different field, that of politics. The egalitarian potential of beauty, noted by both Rancière and Hickey, depends on the artwork's idleness or, in Gilbert-Rolfe's terms, its frivolity. Seduced by the enthralling object, the viewer awakens to the possibility of a different world, liberated from the ties that bind sense (perception) to sense (meaning) in socially predetermined ways.

Stiob, however, is fundamentally anti-dialectical. Doubtless arising as a response to (or entropic devolution of) the strategies of estrangement practiced by the Russian avant-garde and those of enthrallment pursued by Socialist Realism, the late Soviet underground

³¹A. S. Griboedov. *Gore ot uma: Komediia v 4-kh deistviiakh v stikhakh* (Moscow, 1987), 134.



moved along a different path, no longer invested in hidden powers or the promise of new worlds. Rather, the world appeared to these artists as an abandoned ruin, littered with the dead signifiers of those earlier moments of cultural production. Occupying these ruins did not mean reviving them. It meant inhabiting a state between form and formlessness, life and death, exuberantly occupying both opposed categories as if unaware of their distinction. As in Tobreluts's *Music Forever*, the Neoademicians strummed the lute of beauty, oblivious to the tower falling behind them.

What was the broader meaning of such practices? Here one should recall how modern art has consistently yearned for an impossible consummation. The modern understands itself as an incomplete break in historical time that anticipates a second rupture to complete its promises of transformation. But whatever variant of Hegel's infamous thesis of the "end of art" one considers, this end is never realized but always deferred. The Soviet experiment represents the first attempt by a culture at the European periphery to reconfigure that first rupture (the Russian Empire's revolutionary entry into modernity) as already the second one, as if leaping over the agonies of modern history. But this utopian dream left the revolution even more desperately trapped in the logic of deferral. The Soviet writer Andrei Platonov perhaps captured this condition most clearly when he wrote of the "first socialist tragedy," calling for an art that can promote patient endurance, bearing the burden of a future still to come.³²

Platonov's friend, the philosopher Mikhail Lifshits, located a similar tragic moment at the cusp of modernity in what, following Heinrich Heine, he called the *Kunstperiode*, or period of art. This moment arrives at the peak of aristocratic culture, when art briefly escapes the narrowness of class interest and touches the "popular fundament."³³ Anticipating Rancière, Lifshits sees the *Kunstperiode* as a moment of "aristocratic democracy," in which "the greatest achievements of artistic culture" occur, "approaching the species-interests of humanity."³⁴ Such art—the true classic—requires a posture of "humane resignation," rejecting the cultural degradation behind modernity's promises while also accepting the old world's demise. Because of this temporal misalignment, however, the *Kunstperiode* is necessarily short-lived. For Lifshits, the fate of every classic artist is invariably one of tragic isolation.

The tragic consciousness of these early Soviet authors reflects an awareness that their revolution could not overleap the temporality of modernity. The second rupture remained far over the horizon. And when it did finally arrive, it took the unanticipated form of a revolution against revolution itself—the neoliberal revolution, outsourced by the First World to the Second, which managed to consume the globe in the span of a single generation. The dominant aesthetic form of this outsourced revolution was late/post-Soviet *stiob*, as the Russian Empire once again strutted onto the world stage, now playing farce instead of tragedy. What this last generation of Soviet artists ultimately proved in their exuberant undermining of modern aesthetics, collaging enthrallment and estrangement upon the flat

³²Andrey Platonov, "On the First Socialist Tragedy," trans. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler and Olga Meerson, with Jonathan Platt, in *Happy Moscow* (New York, 2012), 153–57.

³³Mikhail Lifshits, "Narodnost' iskusstva i bor'ba klassov," in his *Sobranie sochinenii v 3 tomakh* (Moscow, 1986), 2:262.

³⁴Ibid., 266.



field of their desubjectivized ignorance—a flatness that emerges from modernist aesthetics but eschews its criticality—was that modernity cannot be consummated but only abandoned and forgotten. Occupying the ruins of Soviet modernity, the *stiob* militants of the 1980s and 1990s reveled in the slackening of modern power, which could no longer be either witnessed or withheld.

Bearing this context in mind, I want to conclude with an examination of Tobreluts's 2003 project *Emperor and Galilean*—the last and largest series of digital collages she produced before turning exclusively to painting in her practice. In this series, based on Henrik Ibsen's eponymous 1873 drama, one finds a host of familiar devices—the superimposed faces of “celebrities” (in this case primarily Nietzsche and Wagner), colorized statues from the collections of the Hermitage and the Russian Museum, even the illustrational literariness of the *Golden Ass* project. But now Tobreluts puts these techniques in service of a work that aspires to world-historical proportions and tense dialectical interplay. Admittedly, these ambitions are themselves borrowed from Ibsen, whose play describes a moment of epochal rupture quite reminiscent of Lifshits's *Kunstperiode*. The Emperor Julian, witnessing the eclipse of Rome's imperial splendor by Christianity, turns against the tide of history and attempts to resurrect the old pagan cults. His tragedy, however, is defined foremost by a desire for synthesis, reconciling Rome and Christ in a “third empire,” in which he hopes to rule as “Emperor of the realm of the Spirit and God of the realm of the Flesh.”³⁵ These desires remain unrealized, however, and Julian only suffers their contradiction before dying on the battlefield.

Tobreluts described the core tension of the project as a “tragic confrontation of two principal forces, namely, the confrontation of a white, swan-like romanticism and a black, draconian mysticism.”³⁶ Associating Julian's passion for beauty with Ludwig II of Bavaria, a favorite of the New Academy for his withdrawal from politics to focus on grandiose architectural projects and patronage of the theater, Tobreluts links the violence of Ibsen's play and the iconoclasm of the Christian martyrs with the radical modern philosophies of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, which eventually prevailed over aesthetic illusion. At the same time, the late Novikov's darker, more militant persona is also a clear subtext. Julian's tragedy becomes a prism for understanding contradictions that ripened within the New Academy as the first post-Soviet decade drew to a close.

Or, perhaps it is more accurate to say that Ibsen's drama provides Tobreluts with a way to reinvent the vitalist desubjectivization of *stiob* as epochal tragedy. The work is meant to augur its own version of the “third empire,” and Tobreluts is clearly attuned to the imperial ramifications, photographing the scenery for many of the images in Crimea—Russia's own imperial paradise and its closest link to antiquity. However, in order to promise synthesis, she must first pull apart the negative and affirmative aspects of her foundational contradiction, which the aesthetics of *stiob* had invariably ignored. Thus, throughout the series, Tobreluts attempts to set pagan beauty and Christian truth at odds with one another, so that their tragic conflict might release its historical potential. Portraits of Hecate (whose

³⁵Henrik Ibsen, *Emperor and Galilean: A World Historical Drama*, trans. Brian Johnston (Lyne, NH, 1999), 156.

³⁶Olga Tobreluts, *Emperor and Galilean* (Oslo, 2003), 8.



statue comes to life in Ibsen's play, recalling Schiller's *Juno Ludovisi*) and Macrina, one of the Christian martyrs, are superimposed in a ghostly collage.³⁷ A dream in which Julian sees two of the Christians come to him as sirens is illustrated with dramatic homoerotic beauty.³⁸ The wasps used to kill one of the martyrs are transformed into a decorative pattern on his loincloth (figs. 13–15).³⁹ In each case, light and darkness, pagan beauty and militant devotion to Christian truth, are combined in a way that diminishes any *stiob* effects and reinstates the tragic contradiction.

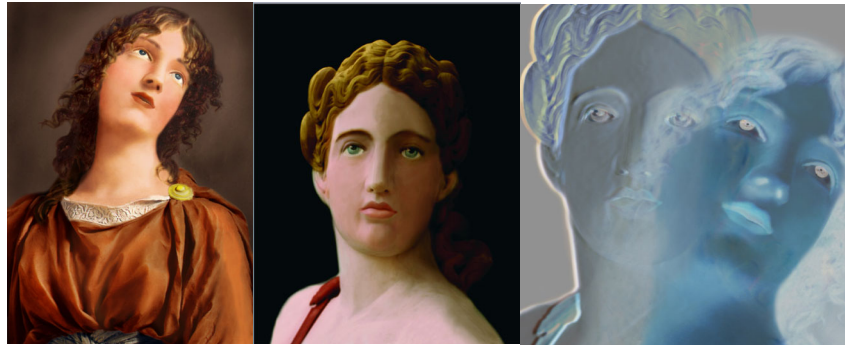


FIG. 13



FIG. 14

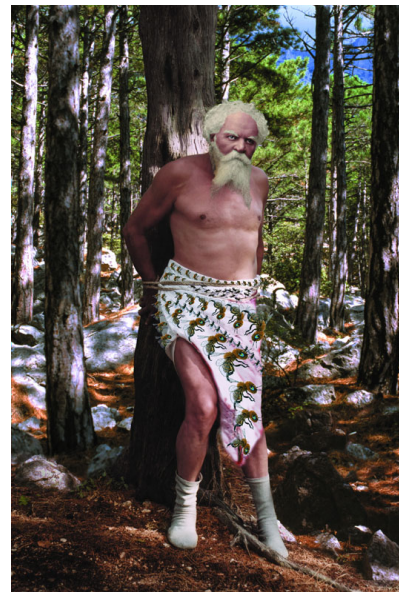


FIG. 15

³⁷“The marble torch flames in the statue's hand ... and then, in the bright bluish light, everyone saw how the statue's face came to life and smiled upon them” (Ibsen, *Emperor*, 37).

³⁸“I heard a blissful singing, but the song came from two birds with women's faces. They swooped down at an angle toward the coast, then settled gently to the ground; the bird shapes melted away like white mist and there, in the soft dim light I saw the two of you” (ibid., 40).

³⁹“The unbelievers have assaulted Marcos, the old bishop, dragged him by the hair through the streets, thrown him into a sewer, pulled him out filthy and bloody, smeared him with honey and hoisted him up a tree and set there to be stung by wasps and poisonous flies” (ibid., 143).



Tobreluts uses two images to highlight Julian's tragic isolation. In the first she appropriates a figure from Fedor Kamenskii's 1872 sculpture *First Steps*, in which a toddler prepares to walk while still resting his right hand on his adoring mother's outstretched arm. Tobreluts manipulates the image (removing the mother, reversing the left-right orientation, making the child appear more upright, and giving him piercing blue eyes) and associates it with a passage from Ibsen in which Julian's mentor, Maximus, laments the emperor's death and names him the third, after Cain and Judas, in a line of "great helpers in denial" who have been "sacrificed on the altar of Necessity."⁴⁰ In the new image, the child Julian emerges uncannily and unsupported from black emptiness to suffer alone the historical contradiction of his epoch (figs. 16–17). In a second association, Tobreluts links Julian to the goose that Ibsen uses to resolve the recurring motif of sacrifice in the play.



FIG. 16



FIG. 17

When the emperor's pagan program has fallen into disarray before the stout resistance of the martyrs, and crowds of discontented citizens are desecrating temples and toppling statues across the empire, Julian prepares to make a sacrifice in honor of Cybele, but the goddess's priest has only brought a single goose. Tobreluts catches the tragic association with the emperor himself, creating a collage titled *Saviors of Rome* in which the goose stands nobly before an ancient ruin (fig. 18).

Both of these images can be interpreted as moments of irony veiled behind a deadpan seriousness. However, they lack the characteristic exuberance of *stiob*, and so the irony appears decidedly tragic instead. The reason for this substitution is not hard to discern. If the survivors of the late Soviet *Kunstperiode* are to remain faithful to it, they must recuperate

⁴⁰Ibid., 47, 197.



its power as an event in the history of modern culture. But this fidelity is itself caught in a contradiction, since the logic of *stiob* is to undermine the foundations of such historical logic, oblivious to the clash of affirmation and negation, freedom and necessity, beauty and the sublime. By interpolating the New Academy into Ibsen's world-historical drama, Tobreluts in fact confirms its demise.



FIG. 18

NOVIKOV'S UNTIMELY DEATH is not the only reason the New Academy's particular brand of *stiob* aesthetics failed to survive the first post-Soviet decade. Because of its deep entanglement with the neoliberal revolution, *stiob* desubjectivization no longer functioned as an avant-garde strategy after the post-Soviet Thermidor—the 1998–99 sequence that ushered Vladimir Putin into power amid a new economic crisis (Russia's default on its international debts and devaluation of the ruble) and the beginning of the Second Chechen War with the Moscow apartment bombings. Indeed, because of the epochal impact of the neoliberal revolution, late/post-Soviet art is arguably the *last avant-garde*—the last revolutionary “event” in the history of modern art.



This familiar-sounding claim (one more “end of art”) is no longer confined to the discourse of modernity and its logic of dream and deferral, however. Late/post-Soviet art is not the last avant-garde because it completes the history of art—an impossible task—but because it ignores and forgets this history, anticipating, revealing, and reveling in modernity’s discursive collapse. All subsequent forms of elite art production have taken place within our new historical paradigm—defined in political-economic terms by capitalism’s radical transformations under neoliberal hegemony, and in cultural terms by the very impulse toward desubjectivization that *stio*b aesthetics had been practicing since the 1970s, when neoliberalism made its first political gains. Late/post-Soviet artists were the first to embrace desubjectivization as a willful avant-garde strategy, and in this respect, they bring about the end (dissolution, forgetting) of the avant-garde from within its own logic. Before the last avant-garde, this logic had always sought to harness or at least unveil the eventual power that founds the modern subject, whether analytically reducing the subject to its fundamental properties or deconstructing it as a tragic, aporetic collision awaiting synthesis. The last avant-garde innovation, the last “critical intervention” in the history of modern art, is to announce and rejoice in that power’s exhaustion. Now desubjectivization is just one of the global processes at the heart of the neoliberal (dis)order. We do not need artists to guide us along this path anymore. The ship has sailed.