

Foreword

PAVEL ARSENIIEV'S INTERVENTION IN LYRIC

Pavel Arseniev just can't stop with his poetry. Nor with his politics. This leads to specific challenges in today's Russia. Russia is going through a lyric-poetry boom, and targets of political outrage are not lacking. But Russians generally don't view poetry as the go-to instrument for political expression these days. Despite a deep history of politically engaged writing in Russia, political poetry is often derided as neither good poetry nor effective politics. Or it is simply denounced as insincere—a damning accusation both for poetry and politics. Arseniev's career has been dedicated to upending such critiques, to reengaging with the legacies of politically acute Russian experimental writing—from the avant-garde of Vladimir Mayakovsky to the late Soviet underground of Vsevolod

Nekrasov and others—and to creating institutions and contexts around himself that enable other critical and aesthetic interventions in Russia's present political scene.

Arseniev came of age during the early 2000s, when experimental writing was still overshadowed by the winking ironies of post-Soviet and postmodern disengagement from the political, and when Russian society as a whole was mired in apathy toward its cancerous, corrupt concentrations of power and money. He is a key member of a constellation of writers who have rebelled against that literary and political scene, including Keti Chukhrov, Aleksandr Skidan, Dmitry Golyenko, Kirill Medvedev, Dina Gatina, Roman Osminkin, and Galina Rymbu.

Each member of this group has adopted a distinct strategy for the repoliticization of Russian literature. Among Arseniev's most important contributions to this shared project has been his construction of novel cultural institutions, clearing a new space for political critique in Russian writing. In 2005, Arseniev founded the intellectual and literary journal *Translit*, and in 2011 added the *kraft series of literary and political books and pamphlets—publications that quickly claimed their place among Russia's most important outlets for alternative creative and critical writing, and for which Arseniev was recognized in 2012 with the Andrey Bely Prize, Russia's oldest and most prestigious nonstate literary award.

Similarly, beginning in 2008 Arseniev was instrumental in organizing the Street University in St. Petersburg, in response, in part, to the first enforced closure of the Euro-

pean University at St. Petersburg by fire inspectors. (EUSP is an independent and globally engaged institution that has attracted much negative attention from Russian state agencies—most recently when it was evicted from its campus and deprived of its license to operate for over a year in 2017-18.) These were free, open lectures dedicated to the dissemination of politically acute knowledge and practice. (Arseniev's own events have been devoted to topics including situationism and protest art.) Finally, Arseniev has brought literary work directly into political life by injecting poetry into street protest, as he accomplished most spectacularly with his punning slogan "Vy nas dazhe ne predstavliaete" (which means both "You don't even represent us" and "You can't even imagine us"). It became one of the most widely reproduced and disseminated battle cries of the mass-opposition demonstrations of 2011 and 2012.

Turning from the institutional to the poetic and compositional, here too Arseniev has been consistently oriented toward the imbrication of the poetic with the political. His main tools include the collection and collation of found speech, the study of art and language in their social conditions, and the use of situationist experiment. Arseniev's own innovations frequently engage with and build on past traditions of politically committed poetry. In the Russian context, these include avant-gardists like the Futurist Vladimir Mayakovsky, the Productivist "factographic" author Sergei Tretyakov, and late Soviet nonconformist authors like Vladimir Nekrasov and Andrey Monastyrsky. Arseniev's broader, global genealogy leads back to the situationists and

direct-action collectives of the 1960s, as well as to the conceptual poetry of the American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E School poets such as Charles Bernstein and Lyn Hejinian, whose works entered the Russian scene thanks to the institution-building and work of St. Petersburg's most prominent experimental poet of the generation preceding Arseniev's, Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, who was one of Arseniev's most important mentors. Poems such as "Offline" and "You Rode Out to Work a Potato Farm" deal with the theme of generational debt and rebellion.

Arseniev's poetic practices recombine, transform, and extend these traditions of performative and politically active language. From 2008 to 2012, together with Osminkin and Gatina, Arseniev formed the Laboratory of Poetic Actionism, which inserted political/poetic texts into the St. Petersburg cityscape as graffiti, installed poetry as conceptual art on banners in public spaces, produced video poetry, and undertook other experiments in crossing the line between the textual and social. The texts derived from some of these actions are included in this volume, as indicated in the notes. In this work, Arseniev is focused both on present linguistic and social contexts and on historical language, both artistic and critical, as in "Translator's note," which reuses a philosophical text by Ludwig Wittgenstein by selective sampling and recombination.

Throughout this and his subsequent work, Arseniev's approach to the fundamental problematic of political poetry—the tediously repeated question of whether "true" art can concern itself with the mundane matter of politics—has

been to hit things straight on, by investigating the relationship between poetry's ostensibly exalted "autonomous" cultural position and its potential for radical interventions. Yet this direct approach demands a certain subtlety. At times, Arseniev's diction approaches the odic and the declamatory, but irony is also a key instrument in his arsenal, making for an unusually wry form of ode. And often enough, Arseniev trains his conceptualist inquiry on the position of art in the social itself, as with "Used Mayakovsky for Sale," which directs our attention to processes of the commodification of political engagements of the past—to the subjugation of avant-garde art and poetry, predicated on their aura of the political, to today's market.

Most crucially, Arseniev turns his investigations on the institutions and cultural myths that entrap contemporary poetry, showing how they also can be used to empower it. As the poems included in this collection demonstrate, Arseniev's main tool in overcoming the critical positions he refuses to accept (that politics in poetry is nothing more than a pose; that poetry is a poor tool for mobilization; that all political art is doomed to be co-opted) is to write poetry about them, internalizing critique and incorporating it into a dialogic meditation on its own overcoming. Consider, for instance, "Stay With Us, Little Boy, You'll Be Our Ph.D.," which stages the ethical quandary of a trajectory into a "soft" academic career, building on the literary capital of his work in Russia. Or take "Russia's Day," which turns the experience of the marginality of the poet's voice in Russian public spaces and political discourse into a meditation on those

very social structures. Here, Arseniev upends the critical suspension of lyric into the lyric suspension of the political.

In his rejection of the stances of subjective lyricist or postmodern ironist, Arseniev also sidesteps the role of the martyr poet who speaks truth to corrupt power. Instead, he adopts the anti-pathetic role of the discursive technician, placing all the tools of the poetic at the service of socially meaningful utterance, applying ironic critique not to deflate, but to inoculate political commitment. Each sphere of activity—from political activism, to publishing, to writing, back to activism via situationist intervention—intersects with one another, as Arseniev spins forward not only toward the politicization of poetry, but also the poeticization of the political.

Kevin M. F. Platt,

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БЕСЦВЕТНЫЕ ЗЕЛЕННЫЕ ИДЕИ ЯРОСТНО СПЯТ

2008-2012

COLORLESS GREEN IDEAS SLEEP FURIOUSLY

2008-2012

*** (l'influence)

Если вы не вакцинированы от гриппа в этом сезоне, то и не стоит. Вакцины против нового вируса все равно еще нет.

— Инструкция в плакатном вагоне.

кавалергарда век:
если не вакцинированы
в этом сезоне,
то и не вякайте
не зарекайтесь

река все равно холодная
повторный заход в воду
легче на море
особенно если никто не видит
ничего такого
если на двоих — минус 20

мимо панибратства прошлого
снова пронесло
спасла защитная броня
скорого поезда

А в Белоруссии собрано 820 тонн черники высочайшего качества.

*Но она будет отправлена в Польшу,
в Германию и в Исландию.*

*** (I'influence)

If you haven't been vaccinated this season, then don't bother.
The vaccine against the new virus hasn't been invented yet
anyway.

— Instruction in the platzkart train car

cavalry's life-expectancy:
if you are not vaccinated
this season
then don't make a fuss
don't make promises

the river's cold anyway
entering the water a second time
is easier at sea
you see nothing special about it
especially
when the eyesight for the two of you
is negative 20

the sloppy comradery of the past
skirted once more
saved by the armor
of the express train

*Meanwhile in Belarus, they've gathered 820 tons of
high-quality blueberries. But they'll ship them to Po-
land, to Germany and Iceland.*

если не вакцинированы
в этом сезоне
то и не стоит
участвовать в акциях
доброй воли
оно само
воленс-неволенс

совесть нации
нужно иметь
в конце-то концов
ну и что, что анклав
можно всегда наладить связь
и найти отцов
сколько в воду не прячь

лицо сгорело
руки сделали

*Сосед по поезду, идущему в Калининград,
читает газету «Криминальная хроника».
Раскрыта рубрика «Звезды и закон»*

если вы не вакцинированы
в этом сезоне
то и не-вы
не вакцинированы