Leave out the word art - what then? The Russian avant-garde sees society as an entire design and man as an experiment? (translation from "Tag bort ordet konst -- vad händer då?"
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by Margareta Tillberg

There are many ways of creating multidisciplined art. Take the Gesamtkunstwerk of Richard Wagner for example, with its totalitarian claims leading our thoughts directly towards Hitler and Stalin who, to a disquieting background rumble, staged the apocalypse of their countries. Or take lighter – but no less serious – tendencies, with the artist using forms of expression suited to the moment. Be they music, painting, poetry, and/or film; be their arena website, supermarket or art gallery.

Does the wish exist to possess the all-roundness of the renaissance? Or is it rather about lack of reverence, or even anger towards the outside world? The sixties saw Yoko Ono, Öyvind Fahlström, Carl-Johan and Marie-Louise De Geer. Our modern examples are Carl Michael von Hausswolff, Leif Elggren and Elin Wikström. Successfully achieved, the processes and experiences lead to insight. And so it was in the Soviet twenties. But encapsulating such a many-faceted phenomenon is now, like then, as difficult as life itself. No one nowadays would rob the classic Russian avant-garde (1900-1939) of its place as a supremely interesting experimental workshop for art, science and society. Fascination for this period has gained added impetus by poor accessibility: political embargo, foreign tongue, memory put to death. This is now history.

One institution promoting cross-discipline and creativity was the Moscow-based State Academy for Artistic Science (1919-1930). Its declaration of intent was written by an artist. Wassily Kandinsky had brought his ideas on multidisciplinary art towards maturity for over a decade. Without preconceptions, his aim was to find meeting points between different disciplines. Such efforts would produce syntheses between activities not previously combined. His synthesis was humans in space, formulated as dance in architecture; objective was for sender and receiver to be a single unit in a resounding cosmos. Basis of the whole project was creation of a superior type of human. With illiteracy at 80 per cent, there was a pressing need for change. Following the Bolshevik power take-over, a series of research institutes were set up to create this being. Society was to be based on "scientific grounds". Fantastic theories were given free rein. From our current perspective, the borderline between horror film and reality appears to dissolve.

From 1921 the State Institute for Blood Transfusions carried out transfusions which were to result in improved self-confidence, immunity against illness and radiant
hair. The unstable mind of the revolutionary worker was also to be stabilised, it was thought. These transfusions were to create a true collectivity. Leader of the institute was Alexander Bogdanov (assumed name meaning "God-given"), one of the most important "scientists" and cultural personalities of his time (he was also to found the Proletkult, Proletarian Culture, mass organisation). He died after a decade of experiments on his own body after drawing off a full litre of blood from himself. Other research teams focused on sexual organs: old men received new testicles from young apes.

After 10 years of accepted experimenting, the state powers decided the free-thinkers were getting too clever in their thinking. From the thirties onwards all thoughts were to be initiated from above. With five year plans, priority was instead given to construction of heavy industry, power plants and roads.

The interest of many east European artists nowadays is in fields such as information technique and bio-sciences. Often nurtured are those ideas from the twenties, avant-garde where science and science fiction were intertwined into utopian projects. "It is not the death of the artist, which interests me, but rather the artist's immortality", says Dmitry Bulatov in the Kaliningrad publication pH. Bulatov (born 1968) is at bottom a poet and literary historian, but he now works at a multidisciplinary level with image and sound poetry. Manipulation of genes, such as creating patterns on butterfly wings not seen in nature, is something which stimulates his interest in art. Biological discoveries and computer technology invalidate the physical limits of the body.

Also interested in identity and its dissolution is Olia Lialina (born 1971). The web project "IDENTITITSWAPDATABASE", by Olia Lialina and Heath Bunting, is about pulling down and building up new identities through adding or subtracting skin colour nuances, or rearranging the borderlines of one's place of birth. Olia Lialina is educated in film from the university in Moscow. With a rich history of avant-garde films and film montage behind her, she made the leap out of Moscow's art and film world with the interactive computer monitor as her springboard. When she started her gallery for web-based internet art she was asked about her role - was she curator, art owner or gallery owner? "I am a form of scientist trying out a new vaccine on myself," she answered. There is extra piquancy to this statement when knowing that Bogdanov conducted blood transfusions on himself after all his laboratory mice had been eaten.

Alexei Shulgin (born 1963) feels that having a specific identity lacks interest: "It merely leads to stagnation". In an interview from 1997 he comments on his role as an "exotic net.artist from Moscow", by saying "nothing of what I do has anything to do with East-West divisions". On the other hand he is keen to investigate the borders between "art, culture and technology in relation to reality". "If we remove the word
art, what happens then? How do we identify ourselves, how do we find new contexts?" Shulgin presents himself on his website as artist, curator and musician. In the early nineties he played an old PC 386DX in London clubs (another tradition from the Russian avant-garde is inventing instruments). "Don’t become dependent on the medium you work in," he states in one of his manifestos.

In an article (30/4 2004) in Sweden’s Dagens Nyheter newspaper on multidisciplinary art coming from the east, Ingela Lind discusses borderlands such as text and image, reality and fiction, and lack of identity. Issues discussed by some of the most interesting artists from eastern Europe at present. She wonders "What happens if an ideas artist commits a murder?, recalling the Crime and Punishment of Dostoevsky. Putting the degree of reality between fact and illusion to the test is an important aspect of art, and artists from eastern Europe have important statements to make on this in particular. But in order to understand what they are saying, we need to know more about their past and the traditions in which they have grown up. Though perhaps the more macabre movements are less enticing. Groups such as the "necrorealists" even receive strong criticism in their native country.

Some years ago I visited the Samizdat (sam = self, izdat = print) exhibition in Berlin. Since all reproduction facilities were in the hands of the state, underground alternatives arose. During Communism, typewritten copies made with layer upon layer of carbon paper, and magnizdat ( magnitofon = tape recorder) with recorded and re-recorded cassettes of singers such as Vysotsky and Viktor Tsoi kept a whole culture alive. With their yellowing papers, and tapes on the verge of disintegration it was like visiting an attic full of discarded waste.

The massive amounts of text produced during the Soviet era were not necessarily used for reading. The Pravda newspaper (Pravda meaning Truth) employed as toilet paper says something about the people,s revolt against the dictatorship. And destruction of mass editions of Lenin Prize Winner novels being the basis of Moscow Conceptualist art of the seventies and eighties was just as self-evident as the patent censorship of love letters by the authorities. Lev Rubinstein made filing cards without files, Svetlana Kopystianskaya made pictures of texts crumpled to illegibility, and Vera Chlebnikova cut with great care the correspondence of officialdom into decorative trimmings.

At this time, encroachments into private life were considerable. Never could the feeling of one’s bedroom perhaps being bugged be shaken off, nor could the disagreeable civil servant from the rust-brown office leave one’s mind. The almost psychotically blurred boundary for inhabitants of the dictatorship between daily routine and surrealism made life a nightmare. And "nightmare" was the first new word I learnt as freshly arrived visiting student in Moscow. Lack of information is lack of power. This we are all aware of. The Iron Curtain concealed a brutal insight
into lack. Living in illusion was easier further west. Attitudes to knowledge on earlier art also differ. Knowledge of one’s own history is forbidden in dictatorships. Here in Sweden, of reasons unknown to me, students at our schools of art fear history. And the serious here is that unwillingness to seek out knowledge means that art with something important to say might disappear in the roar of time.

Tradition in Russia and Poland made the issue of choice of medium, paint or text, irrelevant. Belonging to what was termed the “intelligentsia”, the educated section of society meant taking responsibility for society, whether writer, musician, librarian or doctor. The public at exhibitions and concerts in Russia is largely made up of engineers and technicians. In Sweden these events are attended by fellow cultural practitioners, resulting in this way in a more segregated country. Communicating is more difficult if one’s expertise is limited to a specific field, and criticism cannot be handled. In today’s world of art there is considerable fear of expressing a point of view. In the Russia of spying and prying, however, this fear would have made a person into a non-person: those without opinion did not show their (true) face, were untrustworthy.

And Russian artists now, do they show social responsibility? An interest in ideological issues? Social criticism? For many years now we have been spoiled by east European artists being more interested in us than we in them. To continue with this would be a major mistake. People growing up under dictatorship and degradation have experiences from which we can learn. They have developed antennae to pick up on suppression and subtle political manipulation. They know now they have been guinea pigs in a giant experiment. And here is where their view of the world differs from ours.