

ARTFORUM

Parks and Recreation

October 1, 2011, Moscow, by KATE SUTTON



Left: Moscow Biennale curator Peter Weibel. (Photo: Ilya Murashkin) Right: ArtMoscow curator Christina Steinbrecher. (Photo: Kate Sutton)

IT WAS MIDNIGHT IN MOSCOW, and I was walking down a well-lit, tree-lined avenue, bolstered on either side by a set of open-air dance schools, where couples twirled and jerked to routines obviously choreographed to more accommodating music. Through the trees, I caught snatches of a screening under the stars, courtesy of the Pioneer Cinema, bastion of independent film in this city. Further down the path, long-legged *devushki* roller-skated around fluorescent-lit fountains while the park's loudspeakers blasted an aching hip playlist—everything from the Kills to the Shirelles. In the clearings, I could just make out the silhouettes of sculptures from the CCC Garage's public art program, "Necessary Art," which had launched mere hours before.

Welcome to Gorky Park.

Once a haven of carousing sailors and feel-the-love power ballads, Gorky Park was radically reenvisioned this summer as part of an initiative bankrolled by collector Roman Abramovich and executed by the think tank at the nearby Strelka Institute. Strelka has its sights set on creating thirteen or fourteen more such open-air cultural centers in a city that still remembers when all space was public. Gorky Park will retain its pride of place as the first of these

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centers and, more pressingly, as the site of the Garage's future venue. In the meantime, Dasha Zhukova's Iris Foundation has been keeping busy with New Holland in Saint Petersburg, populating the island of the former Imperial Admiralty with skateboarders, community gardeners, and the Bruce High Quality Foundation.



Left: Artist and curator Katya Bochavar. (Photo: Kate Sutton) Right: Curator and Biennale commissar Joseph Backstein. (Photo: Ilya Murashkin)

If not winds, then at least breezes of change could even be felt across the street at the Central House of the Artists. Now in its fifteenth year, ArtMoscow has been noticeably reinvigorated, having charged curator Christina Steinbrecher with the task of turning around a fair known mostly for its corruption and customs scandals. While certainly slimmer than previous editions, ArtMoscow, which opened to the public on September 20, is also sleeker, with VIP programs, panel discussions, and improved exhibition spaces (perhaps taking tips from the upstart Cosmoscw fair, whose showstopping next venue is one of the best-guarded secrets in town).

"I am quite surprised, actually," Steinbrecher confessed over a much-needed coffee. "No one knew what to expect in this economic climate, and yet every booth here sold at least something, which is rare for any fair. Now if we could only jump-start the market for emerging artists. So many collectors here would love to pick up a few pieces for under five thousand euros, but there just don't seem to be many galleries that can cater to that and still cover their rent."

As the Garage's current venue is preparing for the presence of Her Majesty Marina Abramović, Peter Weibel's main project for the Fourth Moscow Biennale was split between the vast warehouses of Artplay and TsUM, the upscale department store owned by Mercury Group (whose other holdings include Phillips de Pury). TsUM made its debut as an exhibition space during the 2005 biennial, when it hosted Daniel Birnbaum, Gunnar Kvaran, and Hans Ulrich Obrist's "Uncertain States: American Video Art at the Beginning of the 3rd Millenium."

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Left: Artist Misha Tolmachev, Anna Dylgerova, and artist/designer Gosha Rubchinsky. Right: IRWIN's *State in Time*, 2011. (Photo: Viktor Misiano)

I was familiar with the problematics of setting a biennial on the shiny tiled floors of a luxury goods store, but at the opening ceremonies I was still momentarily distracted by the VIP queues for the elevator: It was like someone had rounded up all the attractive men in Russia and taught them how to dress. Things really *are* changing in the Moscow art world, I mused. Following my gaze, a friend clarified: “Oh hon, that’s for the Tom Ford presentation.” Resigned, I perked up to see Isaac Julien and Garage curator Yulia Aksenova amid the crowd spilling out of the elevators across the perfume counters. (I would get my fill of good-looking men in suits: Ingeborg Lüscher’s *Fusion*—featuring Swiss soccer players dressed as managers—inexplicably appeared at both venues. No complaints.)

Earlier, Weibel had lauded his exhibition concept as a type of “medium justice”: “No genre was excluded, not even painting!” In other words, “integrated” Twitter feeds and live-action Google mapping juxtaposed with Gerhard Richter’s 2009 painting *September*. There were plenty of examples of “new media art” (Weibel’s specialty). Electroboutique’s *Big Green Head* transposes a contorted reflection of anyone standing in front of it onto a postapocalyptic video scene. When the sensors detect that their subject has “returned to nature” (i.e., removed their clothes), the viewer is rewarded by having his or her reflection restored, now amid an Eden. (You would think there are less complicated ways for artists to get girls to take off their shirts.)

With the “Special Projects” too numerous to count, I concentrated on my own parallel program. Topping the list was Katya Degot’s “Auditorium Moscow: A Sketch for Public Space,” but the three times I tried to go, the doors were locked. (The “public” part must still be in draft stage.) Instead, I joined the “Impossible Communities” forming at the Gogolevsky branch of the Moscow Museum of Modern Art. Two years in the making, the ambitious exhibition is the pet project of the ESCAPE group and was curated by none other than Viktor Misiano. It was advertised that the curator himself would appear at ArtMoscow on Saturday,

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but organizers failed to mention the program to the esteemed but elusive Misiano, who spent the weekend at home in Italy, safely out of reach of roundtable discussions.



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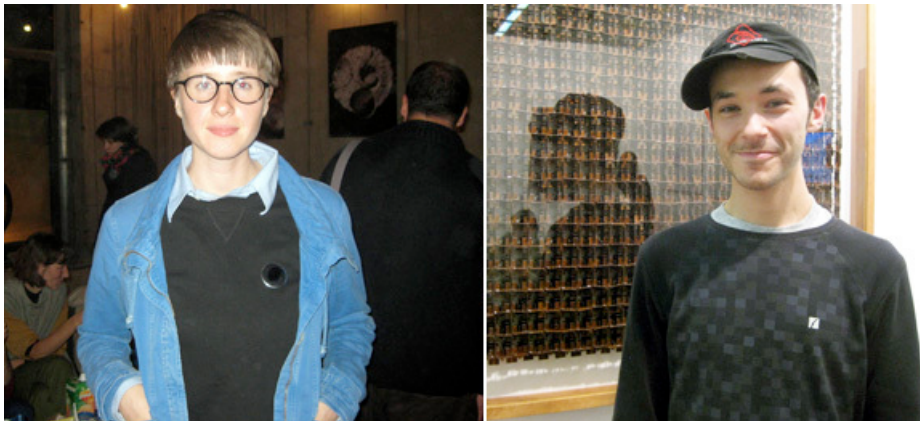
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Left: Artist Alexey Buldakov. Right: Artists Alice Ioffe and David Ter-Oganyan. (Photos: Kate Sutton)



Left: NCCA Moscow director Mikhail Mindlin and XL's Elena Selina at ArtMoscow. Right: Andrey Bartenev. (Photos: Kate Sutton)

Two floors down, artist David Ter-Oganyan struck his own curatorial coup with “On/Off,” a rowdy but respectable group show of promising artists such as Zhanna Kadyrova, Alexandra Galkina, and Ivars Gravlejs. The last won me over with his *Photography Without a Camera*, in which the artist places his own SIM cards in display cameras at electronics stores, later recovering the test footage taken by customers. Andrey Kuzkin’s contribution was to host a rave two days before in the space, leaving the party trappings alongside a video of the proceedings. Ter-Oganyan was on hand at the opening to console an unwitting star as she

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watched herself flailing across the floor. “It really could be worse,” he tried, as the scene switched to another artist jubilantly christening the staircase with his urine.

Not rested enough for a follow-up rave, I slipped downstairs to Olga Chernysheva’s suite of characteristically rich, understated portraits, “To Moscow.” Echoing the Chekhovian mantra, she focuses her lens on bus drivers’ faces, as seen through windshields stamped with signs reading TO MOSCOW. The piece harks back to an era when the city held the kind of promise now permeating the Gorky Park project—a promise that had been somewhat overshadowed by Putin’s big announcement that afternoon. Could it really be that the more things change, the more they stay the same?

<https://www.artforum.com/diary/kate-sutton-around-artmoscow-and-the-fourth-moscow-biennale-29056>