

The Craft: On the Neo-Surrealist Sanctuary of Russian Feminist Art

Anonymous Author

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The Craft: On the Neo-Surrealist Sanctuary of Russian Feminist Art

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This essay observes and analyzes the practices of a new generation of Russian women artists and their regionally unique politicized and feminist engagement with esoterica and the tactics of occultism and mythmaking. By exploring the work of Alisa Gorshenina (Alice Hualice) and Katerina Lukina in particular, this contribution aims to investigate the highly gender- and time-specific conception of artistic and feminist sanctuary that emerges through Gorshenina's and Lukina's neo-Surrealist methods, as well as their relation to the legacies of Western Surrealist and Dada traditions. Drawing on the theories and rhetorical tactics of folk-oriented precursors such as Silvia Federici, and her establishment of the direct

link between the transition to (late) capitalism and the increase in misogynist violence and demonizing othering of women; the Zurich Dada scene, with its deployment of theatricality and mimetic excess to critically mine the depth of performed and performative normativity; as well as others such as Briony Fer, Rosalind Krauss, Michael Taussig, Georges Bataille, and Hal Foster, this text investigates and outlines the way in which the expanded neo-Surrealist practices of Gorshenina and Lukina reflect, and reflect upon, the fragile and complex historical position of the female subject within Russian society of the last decade, as well as attempt to construct a creative sanctuary for its re-affirmation.

Keywords: Dada, feminist art, folk art, gender performativity, occultism, sanctuary, Surrealism

'All this was duly revolting to Murphy, whose experience as a physical and rational being obliged him to call sanctuary what the psychiatrists called exile'

—Samuel Beckett, Murphy
(1994: 177–78)

'When positivism fails to protect us, when systems betray our trust, how on earth can we depend on our own collective perspicacity?' inquired the art news website *Artspace* in February of 2019. 'For the Surrealists, the answer was to make flux beautiful, to render the unfamiliar delicious, and to challenge the slow choke of totalitarianism with bright, breaching chaos [...] There are

many factors explaining Surrealism's recent reintroduction to contemporary art [...] but it feels notable that women artists feature heavily on the forefront of this particular upswing' ('The New Surrealism...' 2019).¹ What is of particular interest to me is how, to what extent, and why this new wave of distinctly feminine- and feminist-coded Surrealism has become recently especially widespread among Russian and Russia-based women artists. Not only that: it has also, and most significantly, taken on a valence all of its own, markedly distinct from that of its Western counterparts.

In his 1923 text on Russian political and cultural history's unique defining trajectory, Boris Vysheslavtsov alludes to Fyodor Dostoevsky in defining how 'out of the Russian element of Chaos is created a wonderful Cosmos. In it [Dostoevsky] sees not merely madness [...], but something else too—a certain infinite power, a certain mysterious potential. Indeed, Chaos potentially contains everything—both good and evil, both harmony and dissonance, both beauty and ugliness; in it everything is piled up titanically, wildly confused. So too is the Russian soul, full of improbable contradictions, and it is linked with Russian nature and its mighty contrasts' (Vysheslavtsov 1923: 5). Russia, he concludes, 'can be saved only by the sober practicalness and realism generated by the Russian element' (cit. in Blagova, 1999: 204).

In his more recent examination of Russia's political landscape today, *Between Two Fires*, Joshua Yaffa (2020) cogently sums up its complex nature by centering on the one quality that has come to define existence there through the last century and a half of political upheavals—moral compromise. Yaffa cites the Soviet/Russian sociologist Yuri Levada and his invention, 'the wily man' (*chelovek lukavyy*), as emblematic of the contemporary way of life in Russia. Clever and resourceful, 'the wily man' 'adapts to social reality, looking for oversights and gaps in the ruling system, looking to use the "rules of the game" for his own interest, but at the same time [...] he is constantly trying to circumvent those very same rules' (Yaffa 2020: 10). In recent history, that adaptation-cum-compromise, for the younger urban cohort especially, has taken the form of cynical consumerist abandon and sardonic resignation from the political.

The discussion that follows centers on practices that engage the idioms of the Folk and the Occult as broadly defined aesthetic sensibilities and intermix them with Surrealist story-telling tactics, along with the valence of implied narrative and its simultaneous collapse. That, in fact, is what renders the spaces they carve, or attempt to carve, out of the fabric of the contemporary Russian life so critically charged and epistemologically astute.

The multi-disciplinary artist Alisa Gorshenina, a.k.a. Alice Hualice, emerged from the town of Yakshina in the remote Sverdlovsk Region of Russia some 1,200 miles east of Moscow in the early 2010s, attracting national and soon international attention to her diverse, aesthetically haunting output through an active and voluble presence on Instagram. *Russian Alien (Russkoe Inorodnoe)*, 2017–20, Gorshenina's presentation for the Second Garage Triennial of Russian Contemporary Art, consists of a trio of wooden window frames decorated in an ornately traditional Russian style and installed against



Figure 1. Alisa Gorshenina (Alice Hualice), *Russian Alien* (*Russkoe Inorodnoe*), 2020. Installation view at Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow. © Alisa Gorshenina (Alice Hualice), all rights reserved, used with permission.

a blacked-out felt backdrop, where each of the openings encircles a torso crafted from a piece of lacy white tablecloth fabric,² with an assortment of decorative, jewel-like elements adumbrating the contours of feminine-coded faces and head styles.

While shop mannequins and figurines in any art practice evoke the historical iconographic baggage of Dada and Surrealism, their deployment here, as elsewhere in Gorshenina's work (such as in her 2018 solo show at VDNKh, more on which below) elicits an uncanny intensity of para-human hybridity. In place of the tangible solidity associated with sculptural form-giving, Gorshenina's figures are hollow and lacking in substance, and are thus deployed as indicators of the void—a canonical trope of Surrealist treatment of femininity.³ The emphatic, aggressively feminized styling of these figures is what, indeed, makes *Russian Alien* interesting, as it does Gorshenina's oeuvre overall, where it is reiterated through the different media of her practice in varying modalities of expression. The absent faces of the *Russian Alien* figures are rendered eerily hyperfeminine with the use of rouge lipstick to suggest lips, pearl earrings, and the traditional Russian *kokoshnik* headdress—the latter a cliché par excellence of the Russianness/Femininity dyad, as well as the reification of a watered down, self-othered national identity (Hellberg-Hirn 1998: 142).⁴

The staged photos, video pieces, and collages that constitute the bulk of Gorshenina's output, acting as vehicles for a core body of costume-sculptures, dolls, and wearable prostheses, invariably center on the artist's hometown: its distinctly forlorn regional fauna and the decaying architecture of a severely economically depressed region that was decimated by the decline of industry and the transition from the Soviet to the neo-Russian socio-economic regime. 'The image of the village,' Gorshenina has observed,

'is not serene [...] The image of the village is of a drunk man [...] of poor women who take everything on, including their drunken husbands, who take care of the livestock, and do all the dirty work, as well as their regular jobs' (Kovalyova 2019). In these staged and occasionally collaged tableaux, Gorshenina herself serves as a model, appearing as a melancholy presence in the landscape in the accoutrements and make-up of generic Slavic pagan and carnivalesque characters, and performing bizarre rituals and gestures.



Figure 2. Alisa Gorshenina (Alice Hualice), *Russian Alienated*, 2018. © Alisa Gorshenina (Alice Hualice), all rights reserved, used with permission.

What is primarily at play here is a technique for which Hal Foster (2015) has coined the term *mimetic exacerbation*—the artistic device that 'seek[s] to trace fractures that already exist within the given order, to pressure them further, to activate them somehow' (pp. 94–95). Specifically, Gorshenina's mobile, adaptable, reverberating re-construction of, and play with, female archetypes continuously harkens back to the gendered condition of 'to-be-looked-at-ness': the way in which women, 'in their traditional exhibitionist role [...] are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact' (Mulvey 1975: 11). At the same time, and crucially for the topic at hand, this hypertrophying of the performatively Feminine corresponds as well to the aesthetics of extreme self-beautification and cosmetic surgery, which are an illuminating mirror of the political body's own self-contortions. Michael Taussig (2012) has observed that 'the aesthetic of cosmetic surgery is today infused with the current political setup, that extravaganza of false faces' (p. 126), so that it seems entirely warranted to see the largest body under the knife as the body of the nation-state, and its individual subjects as hypnotized microcosms reperforming

the political travesty on their own bodies in a delirious last gasp of self-mutilation. If Gorshenina's engagement of the folk and the crude is pervaded by Surrealism and its legacies, with the land-based and the de-sophisticated as its foundational lexicon, it is the Surrealism of George Bataille and *Les Documents* in particular, and its attraction to the primitivist as destructive and de-classifying,⁵ that is her oeuvre's most direct ancestor.



Figure 3. Alisa Gorshenina (Alice Hualice), *What color is the sky? (Kakogo tsveťa nebo?)*, 2020. © Alisa Gorshenina (Alice Hualice), all rights reserved, used with permission.

Gorshenina's performative hyperfeminization of her own image parodies the historical Surrealist view of women and the feminine as a mediating skeleton key between the man of the tangible world and the *Sur-* beyond readily perceivable reality. In this, it is powerfully reminiscent of Susan Suleiman's (1990) concept of deliberate double gendering of form through both narrative and stylistic choice,⁶ enfolding the ghettoization of the 'female' novel into the tropes of the avant-garde. Rosalind Krauss (1999) summarizes this reading's implications for the visual art of the Surrealist canon and its vicinity by observing how, per Suleiman, 'the feminine and the avant-garde will each be seen to function as a trope for each other, each a picture of the other's deconstructive strength, won precisely by the position of each outside of self-blinding occupation of the cultural center with its categorical unities and its assumed truths' (p. 16). Though the female subject is coded as 'worldly' in all cultures, her condition in the West was most

famously articulated by Laura Mulvey (1975) as one who ‘stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of a woman still tied to her place as the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning’ (p. 7).

The female subject’s peculiar modality within the post-Soviet socio-historical context is unique, as well. Maria Davidenko (2017) concisely outlines the unique quandary of Russian nouveau capitalist, post-Soviet womanhood and its psycho-social economics in her research project ‘Searching for Lost Femininity’ by pointing out how the economic policies of the 1990s and early 2000s exacerbated the strained femininity of Soviet times, when ‘equality-to-a-fault’ labor practices had created an unequal support structure that prioritized working- over stay-at-home motherhood, further cementing the separation between the two. At the same time, the rapid and abrupt oversaturation of the cultural and media environment by the tactics and with the trappings of Western-style consumer culture collided with said policy to create an environment where ‘[t]he possibility for Russian women to regain their “natural” femininity, and hence to break with the obligatory gender equality, has been linked to the availability of means for self-beautification’ (Davidenko 2017). Similarly, Beth Holmgren and Helena Goscolo (1996) have observed how, beginning in the early 1990s, ‘a preoccupation with enhancing their looks was virtually Russian women’s sole means of self-expression’ (p. 107). Since the mid-2000s, this trend has become all the more overwhelming and readily encouraged by the state, whose promotion of the new masculinist, heteronormative, increasingly theocratic, and phallogocentric culture found a happy bedfellow in the luxury industry’s sublation of desire (McGowan 2016)’ and cultivation of expression-by-way-of-consumerism. What Gorshenina’s exacerbation of femininity and self-ethnologization engages, then, is the ideologically evacuated space—much like the void shells of her fabric casts—of this presentational mandate.

The Triennial piece’s strategies are repeated and multiplied in Gorshenina’s solo exhibition *Ural Hide* (*Uralskaya shkura*, 2018) at Pavilion 16 of Moscow’s VDNKh amusement park. The show here consisted of two galleries, both densely studded with sculptures. The first room’s sculptures came in the shape of a forest of birch trees—again, a Western cliché of Russianness, as well as an evocation of the mythical arboreal—but also allude to the Soviet-era Beryozka import stores that established the notions of consumerism and simplistic luxury still operative to this day in the national vernacular, which makes Gorshenina’s favoring of nylon hosiery, one of Beryozka’s most prized items, doubly meaningful as well. *Beryozka*, it should be noted, is Russian for ‘birch tree.’ In the other chamber, a collection of mannequins outfitted in masks, costumes, and misshapen appendages ‘representing a distorted perception of the land, the inner faces of people and imaginary animals of the Ural in the shape of tangible garments that anyone could put on, trying on “the other’s hide”’ (*Kontseptsia vystavki...* 2017). In the exhibition statement, the organizers of the show underlined



Figure 4. Alisa Gorshenina (Alice Hualice), exhibition view, *Ural Hide (Uralskaya shkura)*, 2018. © Alisa Gorshenina (Alice Hualice), all rights reserved, used with permission.

Gorshenina's 'sense of the influence of the region on her practice, [which is why] the works are born distorted, unpleasant to look at. These designer objects are dedicated to all the residents of the Urals—people who will never try any of them on and will never accept them as an embodiment of their inner states' ('Kontseptsia vystavki...' 2017).⁸ Like other video performance pieces, photographs, and media appearances by Gorshenina, this exhibition deploys self-ethnologizing and self-othering to allegorically exacerbate not only the geographical 'exoticism' and isolation of the Ural region, but also (by way of the reverberating looping of the thematic completion) the feminine 'mystique' as kitsch⁹ and alienated regionalism.

Gorshenina's employment of traditional folk aesthetics as part and parcel of her operation of [quasi-]mimetic hypertrophy also traces back to the tradition of the Russian Eccentrics, an avant-garde cinema and theater performance movement of the 1920s that advocated for a satirically mimetic 'illogical performance style modeled on the physicality of circus stunts' (Nieland 2008: 6; see also Elliot 1986). Walter Benjamin (1991) documents the moment vividly:

'Clown and Natural people—sublation of the inner impulse and the life centers. New unity of clothing, tattooing, and life. Promiscuity of dress of man and woman, arm and leg. Dislocation of shame. Expression of true feelings: despair, displacement. Consequent discovery of expressive capacity: a man who has a chair pulled from under him, remains seated' (p. 133).



Figure 5. Alisa Gorshenina (Alice Hualice), *New old Russia*, in collaboration with Alexander Bozhko, 2020. © Alisa Gorshenina (Alice Hualice), all rights reserved, used with permission.

In this, Gorshenina's practice further bears a deep stylistic and ontological affinity with the Zurich Dada figure of a 'traumatic mime' and its key strategy of 'mimetic adaptation, whereby the [artist] assumes the dire conditions of [her] time [...] and inflates the through hyperbole or "hypertrophy"' (Foster 2003: 169). This is further reiterated throughout her output by the use of masks: round, oversized papier-mâché faces with over-exaggerated grins that read as simultaneously primitive and terrifying, Medusas petrified and petrifying in equal measure, that threaten the male ego into fossilization.¹⁰ To that effect, the decorative pearls that adorn Gorshenina's masks and objects in places play the role of glistening teeth, bringing to mind Rona Podnick and her Kleinian aggression (Nixon 1995: 79) toward the part-object as a site of pivotal psychic struggle—now re-embedded in the feminine coding of luxury consumerism. In other places, the masks in use bear a generalized but distinctly recognizable resemblance to (pagan-derived) Russian folklore's painted faces of Maslenitsa and Petrushka—the fool and the primordial Feminine, interspersed and blended with the signposts of their consumable reincarnation.

Gorshenina's *ostranenie*¹¹ further runs through the technique of exacerbated quasi-self-exposure, with bulbous, Louise-Bourgeois-by-way-of-Hans-Bellmer¹² figurines that reappear attached to the ghostly, bodyless garments of her characters or otherwise frequently figure as disfiguring, hypertrophied prostheses, worn as masks, face shields, or jewelry by the



Figure 6. Alisa Gorshenina (Alice Hualice), *Horovod*, 2019. © Alisa Gorshenina (Alice Hualice), all rights reserved, used with permission.

artist in her many photo collages and self-portraits. Writing on Bourgeois's own bulbous creations, Briony Fer (1999) has observed that 'what seems interesting now is not simply how the body comes to be placed in the work, but how it does so only to expose a fundamental absence in the bits and pieces of subjectivity that seems to get detached in the process' (p. 29). And certainly, the hand-sized, supplemental sculptural shapes that reappear within Gorshenina's oeuvre rarely make for freestanding, signficatory presences as self-sufficient creatures but rather tend to attach themselves to other objects and part-objects as both tumors and companions in the same breath. They are not there as fully sovereign meaning-holders, but rather exist as flourishes that signify dejection and excess, repellant femininity just below the primary register of the gaze. Fer extended that extrapolation further to Yayoi Kusama—and certainly, Gorshenina's dress creations parallel Kusama's as well, in a continuous and coherent lineage. Like shed skins hung on the wall without a body to permanently hold them up, they bear an unmistakable affinity to Kusama's 'negative hallucinations' 'where portions of the field of vision may simply be cut out, scotomized. If we think of the subject in these terms, she is but an imprint or stain within the scopic field' (Fer 1999: 35).

The frequency of domestic violence and violence against women in Russia, already documented in the late 1990s to exceed Western figures

by a terrifying four to five times (Horne 1999), has undergone a further expansion in the years since, spiking through the roof in the near-two years of the COVID-19 fallout. According to recent statistics, as many as 70 percent



Figure 7. Alisa Gorshenina (Alice Hualice), *Untitled*, 2019. © Alisa Gorshenina (Alice Hualice), all rights reserved, used with permission.

of Russian women had at one point been abused by a partner (Chamusco 2017) and about 14,000 die from injuries inflicted by domestic abusers in any given year (Moiseeva 2019). In the meantime, the year 2017 saw the signing into law, with the blessing of the Russian Orthodox Church, of a piece of legislation effectively decriminalizing non-deadly domestic violence by assigning it a misdemeanor status punishable by up to 15 days of imprisonment (Roache 2018). The advent of capitalism, accompanied by a rise in bodily violence against women: this, along with the aforementioned confusion of femininity in post-Soviet culture, is Gorshenina's particular socio-historical and political context. It invites a reading of Gorshenina's work, and her persistent tactical use of the folkloric and the fabulistic,¹³ through Silvia Federici's Marxist feminist analysis of historical witchcraft narratives.

In her influential text *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici (2004) definitively demonstrated the historical connection between the censorship, condemnation, and ostracizing of witchcraft and pagan ritual, on the one hand, and the Enlightenment, the technologization of society and thought, and the advent of capitalism on the other. In a 'century that saw the triumph of the Copernican Revolution, the birth of modern science, and the development of philosophical and scientific rationalism, witchcraft became one of the favorite subjects of debate,' she observes, 'there can be no doubt, then, that the witch-hunt was a major *political* initiative' (Federici 2004: 168). 'Witch-hunting,' she concludes, 'was instrumental to the construction of a new patriarchal order where women's bodies, their labor, their sexual and reproductive powers were placed under the control of the state and transformed into economic resources' (Federici 2004: 170). In this way, Alisa Gorshenina, as a young Russian woman artist living during the crest of neo-patriarchy and ideological evacuation of political life, subverts this formula by exacerbating its aesthetic

propagandistic imaginary and staging her own exit from the shared socio-political space into an othered sanctuary of self-sufficiency.

This move bears similarity to Taussig's (1987) account of the potential redemptive, healing force of Shamanic practices borne from the culture of terror. In his experience in post-colonial 1970s Colombia, Taussig has observed the way violence and subjugation can fuse their own magic with a folkloric idiom that allows its practitioners to channel the 'othered' and supplemental subjecthood imposed on them into a redemptive, cathartic power. This 'folding of the underworld of the conquering society into the culture of the conquered,' he writes, thus becomes not 'an organic synthesis or "syncretism" [...] but [a] chamber of mirrors reflecting each stream's perception of the other' (Taussig 1987: 218). In the case at hand, it is, of course, not the marginalization of the indigenous identity under colonial rule but rather the active subjugation of the female identity that gives rise to an escape into the sanctuary of the folkloric and the occult.

In Latin, the word *occultus* refers to something that is hidden, covered up, or concealed. In medical terminology, 'occult' symptoms and conditions are those that are undetectable without special inquiry and/or bear an unknown origin. As recent studies¹⁴ have increasingly acknowledged, the aesthetics and underlying concerns of the occult (in the broad sense¹⁵) have played, and continue to play, a meaningful part in the development of modern and contemporary art practices. Marja Lahelma (2018) is one such scholar to observe the way that 'the inward turn, which was one of the essential features of late nineteenth-century art, was facilitated by a wave of popular occultism which broke at the same time. This transformation had a fundamental effect on the way the meaning and significance of the

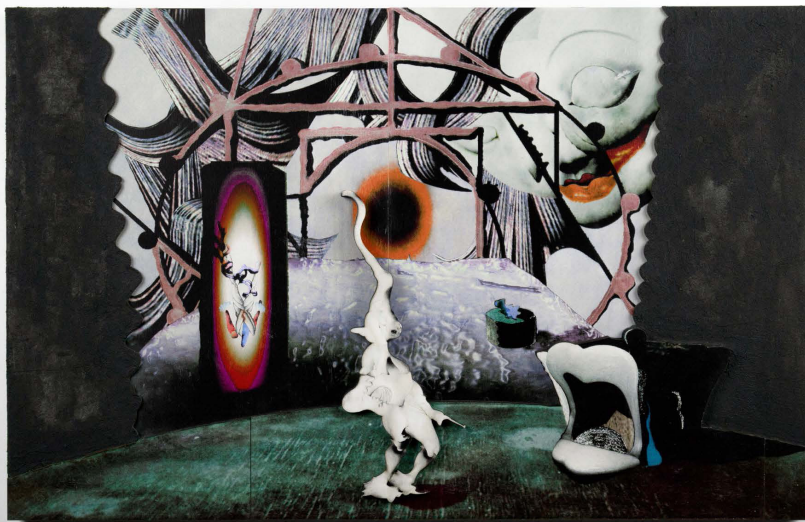


Figure 8. Katerina Lukina, 9th performance: 'greedy séance' from the series 'concert in the seeds club,' 2020. © Katerina Lukina, all rights reserved, used with permission.

work of art was understood [and equally] had a direct bearing on the visual qualities of the artwork' (p. 44), precipitating the transition to Impressionism, and the eventual abstract turn.

Another young Russian artist who readily and notably deploys the tactics of a belatedly encountered Surrealism and the aesthetics of the occult—as well the derisive supra-political warped imagery of Dada and Surrealism—is Katerina Lukina. Lukina's social media avatar shows the artist dressed and made up in a carnivalesque folkloric Russian costume, her cheeks rouged like either the fool Petrushka or a fairytale maiden, her clothing spartan and vaguely monastic. Her art's exit into the occult vernacular, however, in contrast to Gorshenina's, engages an aesthetic and ontological discourse that is still darker and more pointedly abstract.

Lukina notes that *Murashevskiy House*, a series of recent work that exemplifies her oeuvre overall, 'is a book about the inner necessity of going beyond boundaries, outside of which reside many peculiar forms of life and where everything has a particular set order of things' (Lukina 2021, portfolio¹⁶). This makes for an apt description of the vast majority of Lukina's



Figure 9. Katerina Lukina, from *Murashevskiy House* series, 2019. © Katerina Lukina, all rights reserved, used with permission.

work—a series of indescribable, reality-bending tableaux that confuse figure and ground in a style that brings to mind a commingling of David Lynch and Frances Bacon by way of Max Ernst. Ernst, indeed, is an especially appropriate point of comparison, for it was his work that inspired Theodor Adorno (1967) to 'trace the affinity of surrealist technique for psychoanalysis, not to a symbolism of the unconscious, but to the attempt to uncover [...] experiences by blasting them out' (p. 222). What, Adorno (1967) continues,

'surrealism adds to the pictorial rendering of the world of things is what we lost after childhood: when we were children those illustrations, already archaic, must have jumped out at us, just as the surrealist pictures do now. The action of the montage supplies the subjective momentum, and seeks with unmis-takable intention [...] to produce perceptions as they must have once been' (p. 222).

Lukina's work reacts to the abstraction of an opaque state that marginalizes femininity by way of the total abstraction of an insular, self-generative vision.¹⁷ The surrealism at play here, in other words, belongs to a visual field that is not simply a cipher for of externally received data, but rather a field that is always already pre-populated by a rhizome of psychic footprints.¹⁸

There is an easy comparison to be made between many of the figures of Lukina's cryptic scenarios and those found in the art of Ernst's early life partner, Leonora Carrington. Carrington's engagement with the occult is well documented,¹⁹ and was indeed once called out by Andre Breton himself for 'THE PROFOUND, THE VERITABLE OCCULTATION OF SURREALISM' (Breton 1969: 178). She had read her first books on alchemy while still a student at Amedée Ozenfant's academy in 1936 and found sources for the symbolic imagery and palette of meanings that appears throughout her paintings in Celtic legends, Gurdjieffian mysticism and Tibetan Buddhism, designing her own Tarot deck in 1955 (incidentally inspired by the teachings of Russian mystics P. D. Ouspensky and G. I. Gurdjieff). At one point, Carrington voiced an aspiration to invent her own divination system (Aberth and Arcq 2021). Perhaps most apposite to the present context are Carrington's 1946 play *Penelope* and the painting *The House Opposite* that followed a year later, both of which center on the motif of a woman's secretive mirror world of liberation that covertly transcends and surpasses patriarchal society by exiting its confines of linear logic. Yet these works also stand in clear contrast to Lukina's engagement of the same thematic. Where Carrington's occult Surrealism is narrative and literary, directly pointing at its own conclusions within the paintings' structure instead of actively performing them as a structural operation—a stylistic tactic also characteristic of Mexican Surrealism's other banner women practitioners of the time such as Leonor Fini, Remedios Varo, and Frida Kahlo—Lukina proposes them through an infinite dispersal of narratives that continuously foreclose all openings for specific linearity.

Lukina's work is, overall, notably hard to describe. In *9th performance: 'greedy séance' (from the series 'concert in the seeds club')* (2020), it is possible to discern a gaping maw-cum-chimney, a looming Méliès-style moonface, and a ghostly anthropomorphic figure, all dispersed around a confined, box-like environment suffused with ambiguous outlines and color gradients. In *11th performance: 'upset piano' (from the series 'concert in the seeds club')* (2021), there are suggestions of women's legs, a chandelier, and the figures of cameo-ed ghostly onlookers. Vaguely familiar but hard to place, Lukina's figuration is purposefully digested into an idiosyncratic



Figure 10. Katerina Lukina, 11th performance: 'upset piano' from the series 'concert in the seeds club,' 2021. © Katerina Lukina, all rights reserved, used with permission.

form, and specifically one that is suspended within the cycle of digestion, absorption, and reconstitution of the psychic circuitry. Here, the imaginary is what Melanie Klein has described in terms of a splitting apart of the ego as an adaptive and protective tactic. The Ego, she explains, 'is incapable of splitting the object—internal and external—without a corresponding splitting taking place within the Ego [...] The more sadism prevails in the process of incorporating the object, and the more the object is felt to be in pieces, the more the Ego is in danger of being split' (Klein 2011: 6). In other words, the scopic drive within the female experience is in this instance unmasked as a pathological intermixing of pain and pleasure irrevocably enfolded into the act of seeing.²⁰

In comparison and contrast to Gorshenina's folkloric exacerbation of the female-coded contemporary Russian experience of regional decay, Lukina's post-Surrealist, ambiguously occultic scenarios and body-part logic responds to her Moscow context of hyper-capitalization and hyper-connectivity with the tactics of self-concealment and historical acontextuality of a hyper-solipsistic vision. Lukina's work specifically spotlights what Freud (1925) labels as the 'modes of working of the mental apparatus that have been surmounted' and the uncanny effect produced when 'the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality [in an] over-accentuation of psychical reality in comparison with material reality' (p. 398). Here, visual input is displaced from its initial material and sociopolitical context, morphed, and metastasized to create unstable symbols. Hers is a *synthetic occult* that showcases the distinction and fraction between emotion and affect observed

by Brian Massumi (2002), where 'an emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified [affect], the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized' (p. 28).

The physicality of material is significant to Lukina's oeuvre as well. The works are initially conceived as Photoshop collages, generated by free drawing incorporating digital, independent, and reference-free characters. A second layer of abstracting improvisation then takes place: repetitive layering of laser-cut plywood elements of the original file, thus reengaging



Figure 11. Katerina Lukina, 4th performance: "cute fish skin" from the series "concert in the seeds club", 2020. © Katerina Lukina, all rights reserved, used with permission.

the dis-associated symbolism of the original composition in a reemergence into the physical plane. The resultant physical and symbolic depth, as well as the sheer content saturation, is in this way palimpsestic, an expression-event as a 'system of the inexplicable: emergence, into and against regeneration (the reproduction of structure),' and confirmation of Intensity/Affect as 'the unassimilable' (Massumi 2002: 27).

In this way Lukina, like Gorshenina, carves out spaces of unreality for an alternative and sociologically divorced femininity epitomized and centered in and as concentration of psychic processes whose materiality *manifests*—rather than comes into being as a process of digestion of phenomenological input—its own plane. That is how her work arrives at bearing kinship to Gorshenina's fairy-tale narratives' more overt re-mythologizing of their geographic setting; it also forces a similar situatedness to the viewer. One

here is reminded of Sartre's notion of 'a matter of exploding the world [...] to disintegrate particular objects, that is, to do away with the very structure of objectivity [of] witness-objects' (Sartre 1988: 152). Lukina's indeterminate, vague occultism mirrors the state's political opacity.

We can equally read Lukina's aesthetic affinities with the images of Francis Bacon in this context through a reference to a reading offered by Deleuze (2005) of Bacon's own 'performances,' as Deleuze sees them—ones where 'one discovers [...] an attempt to eliminate every spectator, and consequently every spectacle' (p. 9). Thus, the figurative elements, the personages one finds around the margins of the work, as in Lukina's *4th performance: 'cute fish skin' (from the series 'concert in the seeds club') (2020)*, or *11th performance...* become 'attendants,' or 'spectators,' not as participant in the quiddity of the work itself, but rather employed as 'a constant or point of reference in relation to which a *variation* is assessed' (Deleuze 2005: 10).

With this, then, Lukina stages an exacerbated allegory of the alienated and insular condition of being as a woman-citizen in contemporary Russia.

1. The article goes on to focus specifically on a selection of nine Western women artists. It may be fair to assume that this particular line-up was determined by the website's affiliation with an e-commerce platform. Nevertheless, its observation about the preponderance of Surrealism-tinged figuration and performance among contemporary women artists remains accurate and cogent.
2. The use of domestic materials is instructively commonplace and essential to Gorshenina's practice. Her earlier work is dominated by old bed-sheets, selected for their immediate proximity to the unadulterated body (Kolpinets 2018). The same motivation is behind her more recent pivot towards nylon—the two fabrics form a dyad of corporal proximity and the binary facets of normative feminine dwelling.
3. That treatment is something that feminists have historically associated with the generalized misogyny and patriarchal exclusivity of the Surrealist movement and figures at their peak in the early twentieth century, a critique epitomized by Xavière Gauthier (Gauthier 1971). That the tropes and imagery of Surrealism would precisely for that reason come to recently be widely employed, embraced, and re-appropriated by a whole host of women artists around the world, but especially in Russia, is, I believe, both instructive and directly relevant to my argument about the mimetic redeployment of oppressive rhetorical devices in the service of creating queer artistic sanctuaries.
4. Catherine the Great, for one, had used the kokoshnik strategically to signal and cement her acquired 'Russianness' by reintroducing the headwear to Russian society's higher echelons after its prohibition by Peter

- the Great as a symbol of provinciality. Elena Hellberg-Hirn (1998) traces the current vernacular usage of the kokoshnik as the go-to empty signifier of 'heritage' to that particular change of paradigm (p. 142).
5. Surrealism, Bataille writes, is 'a childhood disease' that can lay the groundwork for 'a crude liberation of human life from the imprisonment and masked pathology of ethics, an appeal to all that is offensive, indestructible, and even despicable, to all that overthrows, perverts, and ridicules spirit' (Bataille and Stoekl: 32).
 6. Suleiman arrives at this concept through her reading of Marguerite Duras's *Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*.
 7. The psyche, Todd McGowan (2016) succinctly observes, 'satisfies itself through the failure to realize its desire, and capitalism allows the subject to perpetuate this failure, all the while believing in the idea that it pursues success' (p. 22).
 8. My own translation.
 9. use the term 'kitsch' here in its colloquial, early twentieth-century definition—but it is especially relevant in the context of Gorshenina's pre-modern aesthetic to also recall kitsch's roots in nineteenth-century Romanticism, and, in Ruth Hoberman's (2005) efficient formulation, its 'emphasis on emotion, on beauty, and on the democratization of aesthetic experience, and [...] the Victorian bourgeoisie[s...] taste for sentiment, clutter, and incongruously conceived objects' (p. 77) that gave root to the aesthetic in the first place.
 10. Writing on the mask in the work of Dora Maar and Hans Bellmer, Rosalind Krauss (2000) has observed that 'the attack on the male ego—on its wholeness, its strength, and its stable center—is the task of the Medusa who, acting against the armoring of the male psyche, works to shatter it. An alliance with the Medusa is thus not an attack on women, but an assault on a viewer assumed to be male and an award to his fantasies of their worst fears' (p. 19). There may be a counterargument to be made for the reclamation of the Medusa as a post-Freudian-patriarchal symbol, but the very essence of Gorshenina's neo-folkloric operation is precisely to reclaim the arch-mythological imaginary and reinsert it into the regressive, patriarchal political space that she finds herself in.
 11. As defined by Viktor Shklovsky in 1917 as a technique to reproduce naturally occurring events and phenomena in a way that renders their nature not immediately clear and their presence newly acute. The purpose of this maneuver, Shklovsky writes, 'is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself' (Shklovsky 2016: 16).
 12. On the monstrous defamiliarization of the body-part as an autonomous syntagm-cum-anagram, says Bellmer in an interview with Peter Webb: 'the body is like a sentence that invites us to reimagine it, so that its real meaning becomes clear through an endless series of anagrams' (Webb

- and Short 1985: 38).
13. It's important to note here that the folk element in Gorshenina's work is never touristic or quasi-anthropological, à la Picasso, but specifically *self-othering*.
 14. Notable among them: Sixten Ringbom's (1970) *The Sounding Cosmos*, Linda Dalrymple Henderson's (1983) *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, and the spring 1987 special issue of *The Art Bulletin*, as well as the exhibitions *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* at LACMA, *Okkultismus und Avantgarde* at the Schirn Kunsthalle, *Intuition* at the Palazzo Fortuny, *As Above, So Below: Portals, Visions, Spirits & Mystics* at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, and Tony Oursler's *Imponderance* at MoMA.
 15. The term *Occultism* and its derivatives are sometimes used to refer to the specific nineteenth-century movement and set of practices associated with the pursuit of esoteric phenomena and mystic experiences (Hanegraaf and Faivre 2005), but that is not the meaning in which I will be using it throughout this text.
 16. Lukina K (2019) Personal communication, unpublished portfolio of work.
 17. should note that I feel specific confidence in referring to the intent behind Lukian's image-making process based on an interview with the artist that I had the pleasure to conduct in the course of research for this essay. The rest of the theoretical framework and its extrapolations are of my own conclusions.
 18. am borrowing this reading of Max Ernst's Surrealism from Rosalind Krauss (1989): 55–76, 65.
 19. The definitive study is Susan L. Alberth's (2004) *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*. See also Patrick Lepetit's (2014) *The Esoteric Secrets of Surrealism: Origins, Magic, and Secret Societies*.
 20. On this subject in much greater depth see Fer (1999): 25–36, 35.

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Author’s bio

The author of this article chose to remain anonymous.