

Homosexuality as Device: Necrorealism and Neoacademism

THE HOMO-DEVICE

During the last twenty years a peculiar form of homoeroticism has plagued Petersburg contemporary art. This homoeroticism is a multi-pronged artistic device, a set of aesthetic and marketing strategies, rather than a sincere expression of sexual identity or sensibility, even in those cases where the artist employing the device is actually gay. In order to capture the rejection of authenticity at the core of this practice, I call it the *homo-device*. The homo-device mirrors the nexus of aesthetic and social identities peculiar to Petersburg. Present in one form or another from the moment the city was founded (in 1703), this identity crisis was exacerbated by the rise and fall of the Soviet empire—by the relegation of the *ancien régime*'s capital to provincial status, by successive renaming (Petersburg-Petrograd-Leningrad-Petersburg), by the emigration or decimation of its cultural elite, by its near-extinction during the Second World War, by Boris Yeltsin's empty declaration of the city as the new Russia's cultural capital, and, finally, by the city's self-destructive return to fake importance with the accession to national power of Vladimir Putin and his team of Leningrad KGB veterans and neoliberal reformers. Alternative artists have embraced the homo-device as a means of figuring—and parodying—the desires and traumas provoked by the city's embattled identity and unstable status. Artists wield the homo-device in a foredoomed attempt to re-establish connections with a host of dead spiritual fathers and unrealized

pasts. This haphazard reconstruction of genealogies is part of the effort to fashion a post-Soviet artistic culture.

The homo-device was conceived in a post-war artistic milieu that is bodily rather than cerebral, visual rather than verbal. Moscow, the capital of the moribund Soviet empire, gave birth to a text-centered nonconformist art—the Moscow conceptualist school (Ilya Kabakov and the Collective Actions group). Bereft of the imperial word and dispatched to the periphery of the political and cultural economy, Petersburg/Leningrad has instead engendered varieties of corporeality, expressionism, primitivism, marginality, infantilism, backwardness, deviancy, and inarticulateness. We find these qualities in the work of the Arefiev Circle, the quintessential post-war Leningrad deep-underground nonconformists, led by the painter Alexander Arefiev (1931–1978). Among the younger generation, whose formative years coincided with the Brezhnev stagnation, this brutalist tendency has been caricatured by the Mitki, who achieved union-wide fame during perestroika through their creation of the *mitëk*, a hard-drinking, soulful, *déclassé* late-Soviet everyman, and by the New Stupids, actionists who embodied the spiritual and political bankruptcy of the late nineties. The homo-device should thus be seen as the apotheosis of the (Leningrad) deviant body, which is at odds with the puritanism and hypertrophied heroism of the Soviet (Moscow-centric) regimes of discipline and representation.

*In the end there is no 'body'
that remains unfucked.*

—Irina Paperno



The homo-device is consonant with the prevalently homosocial nature of underground and independent artistic culture in post-war Leningrad/post-Soviet Petersburg. Whether professing allegiance to a retrograde anti-modernist cult of beauty, or fleeing from a (feminized and castrating) domesticity into a pastoral of adolescent mock-sexual frolicking, the prominent artistic groups of the last four decades have marked themselves as men's movements. Their members have retreated into temporary autonomous zones—to the boiler plants where many of them earned money and

avoided prosecution under the statutes against “social parasitism,” as well as to places like the famous AC/DC and Pushkinskaya-10 squats, or the woods in the city’s suburban belt. In these enclaves, cultural and artistic discourses of masculinity and male sexuality have become the raw material of art production and of life-as-art. They are caricatured, recycled, and extracted as present-day cultural capital.

The homo-device is thus also a tool used by the artists to advance their own careers, an instrument for forging

public personae that irritate a homophobic domestic audience while eliciting sympathy, curiosity, and patronage from homophilic artistic *cognoscenti* in the west. The homo-device is a means of creating an artistic brand name. At the same time, it undermines the ways that identity—cultural, social, sexual or historical—is construed today. Petersburg artists illustrate and deflate Judith Butler’s notion of performativity by engaging in a nonstop performance that simultaneously functions as an obtuse but always witting critique of their own condition—as the “wrong,” belated champions of an elite cause that has always already failed forever.

SCENES FROM GAY LIFE

Petersburg artistic homoeroticism comes in two varieties: neoacademism and necrorealism. Both movements are offshoots of the erstwhile New Artists (*Novye khudozhniki*) movement, an alliance of painters and musicians that dominated the far-left wing of the Leningrad art scene in the eighties. In its campaign to create a smart pop culture for the perestroika era—one that combined elements of high and low, of the historical avant-gardes and contemporary western art—the New Artists updated the expressionism of the Arefiev Circle and the legendary artistic loner Boris “Bob” Koshelokhov (born 1942), an autodidact who was a mentor to the New Artists, many of them similarly self-taught.

The New Artists also gave young Soviet masscult consumers more easily digestible products. Among these were the phenomenally popular rock band Kino and the 1988 film ASSA. A cinematic signpost of the era, the film was directed by establishment filmmaker Sergei Soloviev. It depicts a watered-down, stylized version of the artists’ lifestyle (the title itself is a New Artist mock-battle cry), and the finale features Kino doing a cigarette-lighter performance of their aptly titled new wave anthem “Changes.” The New Artists are also remembered for their three media darlings: Viktor Tsoi, the handsome half-Korean lead singer of Kino, who became the object of a youth cult after his death, in a car crash, in 1990; Sergei Kuriokhin, the charismatic film composer, musician, and media trickster who befuddled Russian viewers with a 1991 TV lecture in which he “proved” that Lenin was a psychedelic mushroom; and Sergei “Afrika” Bugaev, the young media-savvy star of

ASSA, who would go on to represent Russia (along with Komar and Melamid) at the 1999 Venice Biennale.

Neoacademism is a neoclassicist movement founded in 1989 by the painter Timur Novikov (1958–2002). Founder of the New Artists, Novikov was a latter-day punk Diaghilev and was the driving force behind much of Petersburg alternative culture in the eighties and nineties. Renouncing the hegemony of modernism, Novikov called upon his comrades—who until then had been mostly interested in translating new wave and rave, Haringesque Pop and Basquiatian neo-expressionism into a Russian idiom—to join him in a deliberate regression into Europe’s pre-modernist “classical” heritage and a revival of the cult of Apollo. Novikov imagined his program as a new ecological movement. The classical culture of Europe is its “nature,” he argued. This culture-as-nature is in danger of being destroyed by a post/modernist culture infected with the contagion of ugliness. Because they live in a kind of neoclassical “nature preserve,” Petersburgers are uniquely placed to lead the counter-insurgency, to return the Beautiful to its rightful place in high art and everyday life. Turning the principles of Pop art on their head, Novikov cheekily wondered, “Can we really replace Esperanto with Attic Greek? The alternative, however, is the beauty of the Coca-Cola bottle.”

In 1993, under the aegis of the so-called New Academy of Fine Arts, the neoacademists declared themselves “professors.” They began imparting to a select group of young male acolytes the esoteric wisdom denied them in other art schools, where modernism and postmodernism, allegedly, reigned. Even before 1993, however, Novikov had been aggressively promoting the gospel of neoacademism with a series of manifestos and exhibitions, beginning with the 1990 show *Youth and Beauty*.

What does the neoacademist version of “youth and beauty” look like? Like the mad camp dream of the para-Symbolist gay poet Mikhail Kuzmin (1875–1936) or the Bakhtin Circle and OBERIU poet/novelist Konstantin Vaginov (1899–1934). That is, if Kuzmin or Vaginov had been reincarnated in the sixties and born to a family of factory hands or technical *intelligenty*, brought up in stagnation-era Leningrad, and come to manhood in

opposite:

Timur Novikov. Detail, *Oscar Wilde in an Iron Mask*, 1992

following spread:

Oleg Maslov and Viktor Kuznetsov. *Circus Maximus, or An Execution during Nero's Reign*, 1995

anarchic perestroika-era Petersburg. American sci-fi writer Bruce Sterling describes neoacademism as “a weird, digitally enhanced shotgun marriage between gilt-and-marble classical grandeur and total, poverty-stricken, street-level hippie junk art. It’s as if a nonstop Burning Man festival had broken out in the giant, rotting palace of Catherine the Great.” This “hippie junk art” evinces a camp sensibility whose aesthetic and discursive antecedents are meant to be all too apparent. We see in neoacademist works traces of an eclectic constellation: the fin-de-siècle *World of Art* circle spearheaded by Diaghilev; Kuzmin and Vaginov’s hallucinated, self-defensive, triply mediated Greco-Roman antiquity (now re-reappropriated by Timur and his team in the service of a “new Russian” aesthetic); the Russian cult of Oscar Wilde and Socialist Realism’s delectation of the athletic body.

The homely borrowedness of this aesthetic is apparent in Novikov’s own late-period works. In his textile collages, secondhand-store fabrics make up the shabby-elegant backdrops for photocopied and appliquéd portraits of the neoacademist gods: Oscar Wilde, Tchaikovsky, Ludwig of Bavaria, and Saint Sebastian. These icons are often embroidered with fringe, beads, and bits of jewelry. The duo of Oleg Maslov and Viktor Kuznetsov, who profess their love for the genre paintings of Alma Tadema, often appear themselves as the scantily adorned “decadent Roman” heroes of their tableau vivante photographs and paintings. Another series by the duo, of nudes in natural settings, recalls the sun-drenched paintings of David Hockney’s California period. Many of their tableaux vivantes, set amidst the ruins of suburban Petersburg, also quote the fin-de-siècle photographer of young Sicilian shepherd boys and fishermen, Wilhelm von Gloeden. The German’s influence is felt also in the digitally retouched photographs of Egor Ostrov, who combines a Hellenistic appreciation of youthful male beauty with a high-tech-powered nostalgia. The work of Georgii Gurjanov, who first rose to fame as Kino’s elegant mod drummer, also alludes to a totalitarian athleticism, especially as celebrated in the films of Leni Riefenstahl and the paintings of Soviet artist Alexander Samokhvalov (1894–1971). The campiness of the neoacademists reached its acme in the 1995 collective project *Passiones Luci*. In these digitally montaged illustrations to *The Golden Ass*, many of the neoacademists appeared in costumes designed by Konstantin Goncharov.

Art historians Kathrin Becker and Ekaterina Andreeva have posited necrorealism as the Dionysian counterpart



to the Apollonian New Academy. The movement was founded in the early eighties by photographer and filmmaker Yevgeny Yufit. The subject of a complete retrospective at the 2005 Rotterdam International Film Festival, Yufit began his career less promisingly, as the leader of a group of young men who engaged in unsanctioned, semi-spontaneous public performance art in the late seventies and early eighties. The necrorealists imagined these performances as experiments in the production of collective cognitive dissonance; or rather, this is how today’s critical theorists explain their actions. During one such experiment, conducted along a commuter railway line in the suburbs of Leningrad in 1987, two necrorealists, their pants down around their legs and their heads wrapped in bandages, simulated anal sex, while a larger group of their comrades staged a brawl behind them.

While it is impossible to know what the train passengers who witnessed this performance thought, we do know how the Leningrad public reacted to necrorealism once it began to show up on movie-theatre and TV screens in





the late eighties. At a screening at Dom Kino, audience members called for criminal charges to be brought against the filmmakers and for their removal to a mental hospital. On the local TV program *Fifth Wheel*, the clinical nature of the necrorealist disease was confirmed by psychiatrists: they diagnosed the artists as necrophiliacs and sadists, seeing in their hooliganism evidence of the younger generation's downward spiral. A focus group of factory workers was also assembled: they unanimously condemned this anti-people's art.

What caused such reactions among moviegoers, psychiatrists, and proletarians? Essentially, chaotically filmed and edited versions of the suburban railway experiment I've just described. Typically, the settings for necrorealist films—industrial wastelands on the outskirts of the city and suburban forests—underscore the movement's penchant for social and aesthetic marginality. Against these idyllic backdrops, men in various states of undress and undeadness chase each other, engage in slapstick couplings and fist fights, writhe, wallow, and commit suicide with the aid of Rube Goldberg contraptions. Early necrorealist films are emphatically plotless and stubbornly provocative. This desire for facile provocation is echoed in their titles: *Urine-Crazed Bodysnatchers*, *Destroyer of Sphincters*, *Werewolf Orderlies*.

The English word *device* is a translation of the Russian *priëm*. In Russian critical theory, the term has had particular currency since Formalist scholar Viktor Shklovsky famously declared in "Art as Device," the first chapter of his *On the Theory of Prose* (1925), that the (literary) work of art is the sum of its devices. The most

explosive of these is the device of *ostranenie*, or defamiliarization. Shklovsky also enumerates *zamedlenie*, or retardation, and *zatrudnenie*, or "making difficult," as sub-varieties of *ostranenie*. New formal devices appear on the scene, he argues, to demolish ossified forms and de-automatize aesthetic perception. The "motivation" for these devices is always masked as content, plot or character, which in fact serve merely as excuses for the emergence of new formal means.

The necrorealists literalize Shklovsky's notion of device as well as the devices themselves. They terrorized their perestroika-era audiences with spectacles that were strange, retarded, and difficult. If the reaction of the guests and experts on *The Fifth Wheel* is any measure of the necrorealist enterprise's success, their audience readily attributed these devices to the strange, retarded, and difficult personalities of the filmmakers and the actors themselves.

The necrorealist version of the homo-device also literalizes another sense of *priëm*—a (wrestling) hold, move, or pose. The physical and gestural vocabulary of early necrorealism—on film as well as on stage, during performances of Sergei Kuriokhin's *Pop Mechanics*—was stupefyingly limited, as if homoeroticism were a kind of possession or mental paralysis, a bodily obtuseness. Among the signature phrases in the sparse necrorealist lexicon is the so-called *mostik*, which readers who survived American phys-ed classes will recognize as the "crabwalk." What likewise marks these devices as devices is their ubiquity throughout the twenty or so years of necrorealism's existence. They persist into the movement's more sophisticated middle age, exemplified by the films of Yufit. Moviegoers whose first encounter with necrorealism is Yufit's 2002 film *Killed by Lightning* (a film of real subtlety and beauty compared with the 8mm and 16mm reels of Yufit's early "heroic" period) might interpret the adolescent nude frolicking and roughhousing exhibited by the crew of a rogue Russian submarine only in the terms provided by the film's (rudimentary) treatment of plot and character: the crew "fall in love" and then go mad and kill each other because of the hardships of life at sea. A veteran necroviewer's reaction to these antics, however, is a form of brand recognition. The necrorealist homo-device is an overloaded sign: it gestures toward the defamiliarization of cinematic perception at the same time that it stands for its own selfsameness, for the object body that



persists even after history and culture have had their way with it.

Inadvertently, then, the way that the necrorealists employ the homo-device points to Shklovsky's peculiarly circular logic: the advent of the new is always, in terms of deep structure, the reactivation of one and the same devices of estrangement. To announce oneself as a new "avant-garde" (a term invoked in the contemporary Russian art world, more often than its English equivalent, to describe merely *new* art) after the total collapse and discrediting of all previous avant-gardes, is to willfully engage in the revivification of not-so-exquisite corpses; to beat a dead horse. Or rather, to beat a rather scuzzy blow-up doll, which the necrorealists did with grim glee in their early films and street performances. The necrorealists and neoacademists thus "bare" the poverty of art's devices by baring their own and others' bodies.

SCREWING THE FATHERS, SCREWING EVERY(BODY)

Another meaning of *priëm*—"reception, acceptance"—surfaces in a 1989 *Flash Art* interview with Novikov and Afrika. When asked point-blank by their American

interviewers, the two artists glibly identify themselves as gay. They reinforce this self-identification with a number of extended similes. Novikov describes himself as "a cavity in which people stick their fingers: I understand and accept everything." Afrika explains what this aesthetic promiscuity means in terms of the artists' cultural inheritance. Recalling the Russian futurist philosopher Nikolai Fyodorov's utopian project of "resurrecting the fathers," Afrika comments that "from the American point of view we're probably fatherfuckers, not motherfuckers." In order to appreciate the despair and ingenuity at the heart of the homo-device, we need to unpack these two similes—to understand how the homo-device functions as a strategy of aesthetic promiscuity, and how its initial impulse is the frustrated desire to connect with fathers who are always already dead.

Following a suggestion made by Irina Paperno, I would term the homo-device's first level of aesthetic promiscuity *screwing each other*. This use of the device appears, first of all, in what we see in the works. In necrorealist films, we see naked and half-naked men chasing each other, caressing, wrestling, coupling, scrumming. In neoacademist works, we see the male body as the object



of (clichéd) male (aesthetic) desire, and the mechanical recycling of motifs from the catalogs of international camp and Russian queer-culture discourse. This literal reading—that this is the art of men “in love” with each other and with other men—is then realized institutionally. Eric Naiman has speculated that Shklovsky’s *ostranenie* is a form of masculine resistance to the feminine automatism of daily life. The necrorealists and neoacademists signal their resistance to the Soviet everyday by banding together in mock-idiotic or faux-aesthete circles in which feminine presence and, for that matter, “real masculine” presence—that is, society—is almost entirely absent. (In reality, such female artists as Bella Matveeva and Olga Tobreluts have been just as instrumental as their male counterparts in advancing the neoacademist cause.) Like members of a radical secret society, the artists develop their own corporate modes of speech, dress, and lifestyle. To invoke a common post-perestroika coinage, they form a *tusovka*: an enclosed, narcissistic subculture. This “gay artists *tusovka*” is a parody of authentic community, the nonstop acting out of a tasteless inside joke. The motto

of the New Artists—itsself an abject borrowing from pre-war avant-gardists like Mikhail Larionov—was “Everybody can be an artist.” The necrorealists and neoacademists behave as if, to quote Kurt Cobain, “Everyone is gay.”

In this sense, necrorealism and neoacademism are of a piece with the general modus of postwar Leningrad unofficial art. In his study of Leningrad “second culture,” Stanislav Savitsky points out that the city’s artistic underground has avoided authentic self-representation, preferring instead masks and fictional personae, especially deviant and marginal ones. The persona most marginal and deviant from the point of view of mainstream Soviet society—the homosexual—is thus a perfect emblem for the artist—the most useless, suspicious and, alternately, attractive profession within late socialism and early “wild” capitalism.

The homo-device is also deployed in *screwing the audience*. The audience is twofold: Russian and western. The artists manipulate the domestic audience by invoking stereotypes in the common culture. On the one hand, homosexuality is seen by many Russians as pathological deviancy, as an extreme form of behavioral dissidence. It is also connected, in the popular imagination, with the demi-monde of Russian prison camps and army garrisons, where ritual rape is practiced on the so-called *opushchennye*—“bitches” (literally, the “lowered” or “humiliated”). The most recent publicized case of such hazing—so-called *dedovshchina* (from the military argot for “old timers,” *dedy*)—is that of Private Andrei Sychev, whose own New Year’s Eve *opushchenie* by his seniors at the Chelyabinsk Tank Academy led to the amputation of his legs and genitals. It is also germane that homosexual acts were prosecutable under Russian law until the criminal code was revised in 1994. On the other hand, homosexuality is equated with “rootless cosmopolitanism,” with the figure of the artist in general, compromised by his presumed spiritual ties to the west and the pre-Soviet past. Khrushchev’s violently voiced suspicion, at the now-infamous 1962 Moscow *Manege* exhibition of young modernists, that the artists were *pederasty*, or the rabid nationalist-Orthodox opposition to recent attempts by activists to hold a gay rights parade in Moscow, are instances of this stereotype in action.

The neoacademists aggravate this imagined hostility of

above:
Oleg Maslov and Viktor Kuznetsov. From the series *Satyricon*, 1994-1995

opposite:
Necrorealists Anikeenko and Bezrukov in the wilds of Peterhof, 1993. Photograph by Yevgeny Yufit.



the average Russian not only in their choice of subject matter, but also in their demonstrative overidentification with a particular form of European and Russian hyper-aestheticism. Evgenii Bershtein has shown that “Oscar Wilde” and “homosexual” were virtual synonyms in Russian modernist discourse. The neoacademists subject Wilde and other such high-camp saints to iconic fan worship. Their fanaticism functions as a barely concealed syllogism: we are homosexuals and, therefore, aesthetes; we are aesthetes and, therefore, homosexuals.

To reinforce audience misperception, the artists

compose what Yuri Lotman terms “anecdotal epics.” In their *Flash Art* interview Novikov fans the flames claiming that “Yufit . . . used to pick up the drunks who hang out in alleyways. He’d get them so loaded on vodka that they’d pass out, and then he’d fuck them in the mouth. One of these guys was seen later with his mouth ripped to shreds.” Novikov’s tale feeds the moral panic—a horror of homosexuals on a rampage as Soviet social control breaks down—that gripped Dom Kino audiences, factory workers, and TV psychiatrists. It suggests a disturbing real-life basis for the on-screen antics of the necrorealists, and thus underscores the false equating of

art and life that the artists happily manipulate to their own ends. The journalist Andrew Solomon falls for this ruse. In his widely read book *The Irony Tower* he reports with a straightface that the necrorealists carry dead animals in their pockets and drink their own urine while singing.

Novikov's embellishment of Yufit's epic is characteristic of the artists' interactions with western scholars, journalists, and curators. The few westerners who've written about necrorealism have, remarkably, tended to agree with the Russian psychiatrists. They all think they know what they're seeing: the empirical debris of social collapse rather than a punk critique of the pitfalls of artistic renewal and aestheticized politics. Where the psychiatrists saw deviancy and perversion, however, western scholars have tended to see homophobia and the inevitable damage that Soviet social stagnation wreaked on the tender psyches of the young artists. When journalists and scholars have scanned the horizon of Petersburg art for signs of what José Alaniz and Seth Graham call, in their critique of necrorealism, "a more positive, consensual model of homosexual sex," they've been welcomed into the all-accepting embrace of Novikov and the neoacademists. Andrew Solomon is happy to present Novikov as Exhibit A in his case for a predominantly gay Petersburg art scene. The curators of a recent exhibition of Leningrad nonconformist art held at the Zimmerli Museum at Rutgers University, went so far as to identify the late Novikov as a gay-rights activist who'd been persecuted by the state for his activism. In an Internet "Gay Russian Culture Sampler," heterosexuals Maslov and Kuznetsov are proudly ranked alongside such queer luminaries as Diaghilev, Tchaikovsky, and contemporary gay writer/activist Yaroslav Mogutin. The dynamic duo are also listed as Eastern European "cultural ambassadors" on the International Lesbian & Gay Cultural Network's blog.

The third strategy of the homo-device is *screwing the fathers*. Here we catch the artists in the act of constructing complicated, self-undermining relationships of sonhood with a number of dead spiritual fathers. Yufit's film *Daddy, Father Frost Is Dead* is a graphic realization of this principle of sonhood. A little boy is drained of life by his grandfather, who is apparently a vampire. Nevertheless, the nearly lifeless boy murmurs, "Kiss me again, grandpa." The film's writer-hero is plagued by an army of zombie uncles and granddads—*dedy*—who subject him to symbolic *opushchenie*.

The neoacademists are haunted by their own army of desirable dead fathers, the pre-Revolutionary aesthetic avant-gardes whose authority this post-Soviet "rear-

guard" seeks to inherit. This authority is transmissible only as the infection of repetition, however: the fathers are transformed into slavishly imitated neo-academist heartthrobs. Ekaterina Andreeva claims that neo-academism's goal is to "reanimate historical visions of the beautiful . . . to imagine oneself as a Roman during the decay of the Empire." In his novel *The Goat Song* (1928), Vaginov had already shown that this reanimation project was hopelessly belated. The cultural cliché that links "culture" and "gayness" with the ancient world is obtusely re-enacted by the neo-academists. As if to underscore the utter tautology of their efforts, Kuznetsov and Maslov incorporate one of the settings of Vaginov's novel, the Lichtenberg Palace in Peterhof, as a backdrop for their series *Et in Arcadia Ego: For Alma Tadema*.

The desire for intercourse with fathers extends as well to "fathers across the sea." A key thread in the well-woven mythology of Novikov and the New Artists is a series of encounters with such western art titans as John Cage, Andy Warhol, and Robert Rauschenberg. Cage, Novikov, Bugaev, and Kuriokhin marked their world-historical meeting by exchanging fluids and comically desecrating the avant-garde's most sacred symbol. In the performance *Pouring Water Symphony* (1988), the men stood on black squares and took turns pouring water from small bottles into a larger bottle. Novikov's installation *Tourism* (1990) included dried tufts of the grass that Cage had picked on his visit to Leningrad, a crust of bread half-eaten by Rauschenberg, and a Campbell's Soup can signed by Warhol.

This search for an alternative patriarchy has taken more disturbing forms. Echoing the revival of the nationalist version of the Russian Idea, Novikov created a series of textile collages honoring *Russian Saints*, including Ioann of Kronstadt (1829–1908), a member of the extreme right-wing Union of the Russian People. It was at this time, in the late nineties, that Novikov proclaimed the "new seriousness." One of the first acts of the "newly serious," aka "The Artist's Will," was a public burning—in memory of Girolamo Savonarola—of their own non-serious, amoral works. (In the event, many of the condemned paintings were not so surreptitiously rescued from the righteous flames by the artists and their admirers.) Maslov and Kuznetsov added to this discursive confusion with their send-up of Raphael's *School of Athens*—*The Triumph of Homer* (1999), which reincarnates Novikov as the blind poet Homer, surrounded by toga-draped members of the Petersburg alternative art *tusovka*.



The identity of necrorealism's desirable fathers is only slightly less obvious. On the visual level, in Yufit's films, the fathers are the great 19th-century Russian landscape painters, especially Shishkin. In film historical terms, this series extends to Tarkovsky and other "landscape" filmmakers, such as Dovzhenko, or to expressionists like Dreyer and Murnau. Behaviorally, the necrorealists invoke another Russian cultural archetype: the holy fool (*iurodovyi*). Like the holy fools, the necrorealists present themselves as figures of fun, as outlaws and hermits. They are the monastic bearers of an ascetic doctrine whose highest virtue is, in necro-speak, *matërost'*. *Matërost'* ("toughness") encompasses such other cardinal necro-virtues as *tupost'*, *bodrost'*, *naglost'*, and *muzhestvo* ("obtuseness," "vigor," "insolence," and "manliness"). The index of these virtues is precisely the ceaseless homosocial, homoerotic, homicidal and suicidal "merrymaking" we see in the films and performances. When narratives, such as they are, appear in necrorealist films, it is the tribe of Soviet epic heroes who gets (literally) screwed: woodsmen, scientists, soldiers and sailors, i.e., "real" Soviet men.

The whole project of Soviet (new)manhood is presented as a farcical disaster, an endless daisy chain of *opushchenie*.

Susan Sontag defined camp as a form of "failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience." Like many other Russians today, the necrorealist and neoacademists yearn for affirmative values, for a meaningful relationship with the historical past that can be translated into a positive program of action for the present. Understanding, however, that it is impossible to reanimate the heroic traditions of Russian culture—patriarchal, realist, avant-garde, socialist—Petersburg artists have cynically and courageously reduced them to mere forms, to a theater of fictionalized everyday life. The campiness of their art, as reflected in the homo-device, is a token of their recognition that a certain kind of seriousness has failed forever. The persistence of the device, however, reflects both the continuing desire for connection and newness, and the poverty of means available for creating the new. /

above:

Oleg Maslov and Viktor Kuznetsov.
Untitled, 2003

All images courtesy of Anna Nova Gallery.