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Irina Aktuganova of Gallery 21 & the Cyber-Femin-Club, St Petersburg, interview at Ostranenie

Katy Deepwell

Gallery 21 is a non-profit gallery of experimental arts and media projects, under the umbrella organisation of Tecno-Art-Center. Since 1994, Gallery 21, headed by Irina Aktuganova and Sergei Busov, has organised more than 200 projects, exhibitions, seminars, lectures on contemporary art in St Petersburg including participation in ElectronicPage Programme at the 4th St Petersburg Biennale and the first Russian Art CD-Rom 'Free-for-All'(1997). Events outside St Petersburg include: Stubnitz: Art in Transit (1994); 'New Technology based art in St Petersburg' Vienna, WUK(1995); participation at V2 East network events, Next 5 Minutes (Rotterdam, 1996), Postinformation Utopia (1997); 'St Petersburg media art' ISEA-Deaf, Rotterdam(1996) ; Beauty and the Beast Nettime meeting, Ljubljana (1997); Documenta X, Hybrid Workspace (1997). Irina Aktuganova also runs the Cyber-Femin-Club whose purpose is to provide women's access to information, communication, and media technology, as well as a network for women.

Katy Deepwell : Could you tell me something about the situation of women and media art in St Peterburg?

Irina Aktuganova: The situation of women and media art in St Petersburg is an interesting question and one we have discussed a lot. When we opened our gallery in 1994 for multi-media and as a space for contemporary art we quickly began to understand that the avantgarde field in St Petersburg is occupied by women. Nobody thought about it because it seemed like something normal but when we began to think about it we realised that the main media curators and media philosophers in

St Petersburg were women e.g. Alla Mitrofanova. She brought the idea of media art and media communication to St Petersburg in the early nineties. Gallery 21 was founded by myself - not so old, I'm only 31 years old. The best and most important media artist was also a woman Olga Tobreluts not even a woman, a girl, aged 25.

Katy Deepwell : What made you interested in media art as opposed to other forms of fine art and then led you to set up Gallery 21?

Irina Aktuganova: I worked in different exhibition halls for 15 years and in museums and I made exhibitions of contemporary art. My last interest before media art was in posters, advertisements which I wrote articles about. The next step in my interest was video art, different kinds of electronic art, installation and internet art. I am developing things to my desire. Desire pulls me towards newer and newer fields of culture, not just contemporary art and new fields of social activity. I feel here is the principal point of difference between men and women. I , as a woman, do not conceptualise my social steps and actions. I organise the 'competitio of desires' inside myself. I realise and conquer these desires. If I want to have a gallery, I'll try to set it up. And I don't need to explain why. New fields are always attractive for women. Women are often altruistic about their fields of activity. Women, as we understood it, are interested in content and in new fields. But later the men come and begin to make money and careers there. Men are not so interested in culture but in new technologies, in design.

Katy Deepwell: Do you think the women who are innovators in this field also found a way to get money for their work?

Irina Aktuganova: Sometimes. Three to four years ago when we began to advertise internet activity in St Petersburg, only the women supposed that it was promising, the men were laughing and they were so ironic about it. And now three years have passed and now everybody, including men are excited about the internet because they feel it is now possible to make business in this field. But as for me or Alla Mitrofanova, I could not say that the internet or media culture has made us rich.

Katy Deepwell : Are there still strong differences between men's approaches and women's approaches in the field of media arts in St Petersburg?

Irina Aktuganova: I don't think so. This is the problem of situation. I prefer to leave a space for others to have their profit. I don't want to spend my life in the struggle for a 'place under the sun'. As I understand it, women produce desire by other tools, by other organs, than men. Women always very exactly identify the promising field or , for

example, any talented man, the artist or musician, who can perform. The men around could be ironical, sceptical about this guy, but the women, and girls especially, they indicate exactly the talented person and they feel it by their body, by their sexuality, almost as if they want to have a child from this guy - occasionally, just for 5 minutes, but they have the desire and they understand this is a promising person, he's really talented, really has passion and personality. And women by the same organ or tool, they feel a new or promising field in the same way - a kind of eroticism about this field. This feeling means it is a promising field.

Katy Deepwell: I understand what you are trying to say as an approach to technology and why someone would be motivated to get involved. There is also however the desire within the work. The few films I've seen from Russia by women seem to really be focusing on women's sexuality in a bold, overt way. Is this typical?

Irina Aktuganova: It's not typical. It's the choice of curators who go to Russia and choose films. Natalia Borisova *Infinite Evil* in the programme is very rare in Russia where work does not generally focus on sexuality.

Katy Deepwell: Can you say what the other topics are in Electronic media or video?

Irina Aktuganova: It is impossible to generalise on topics and kinds of form. Russian art is more an atmosphere. Women create a special kind of atmosphere and men create another kind of atmosphere and it's difficult to describe, even in Russian, because it's something spiritual not sophisticated, but spiritual like air or sunshine.

Katy Deepwell: Do you think Bojana Pejic in her introduction came close to describing this in her introduction to the 'Women at the End of the Millennium' programme when she talked about close-ups in women's film and the emphasis upon touch, feeling and sound in the work over sight.

Irina Aktuganova: Yes of course, and not only for Russia. Women are more interested in details, in atmosphere in small things, looking carefully and closely. Now we are thinking in St Petersburg that the time of male civilisation has passed. It's funny to say this, as everyone will laugh at us, as it is so ambitious, but it really has passed. Now is not a time of great ideology, it is not an extension of the time of Genghis Khan and Alexander Makedonsky. It's a time of very personal things, of the very consciousness of life and it's very different for men to live in such a way, very carefully, with love in their heart to details. Life in these details is a kind of religious life. It's a kind of monk-like existence.

Katy Deepwell : A friend of mine has recently described women in the creative arts as like the new nuns working with this passion in extremely difficult circumstances. Nuns not in the sense of being without sexuality but in the sense that their creativity comes first.

Irina Aktuganova: It's not just a question of sexuality, but one of energy. You have a strong energy and you need to use it in different ways - not just to fuck - as this time has also passed. You keep it, accumulate this energy. This energy helps you to feel, to act and to create. This is women's priority.

Katy Deepwell: Could you tell me about some of the projects that have come out of the work in St Petersburg? *Virtual Anatomy*, for example.

Irina Aktuganova: *Virtual Anatomy* is not really a magazine as it is not a periodical. It's an art philosophical project by Alla Mitrofanova and Olga Suslova. They attracted women and men also to discuss the topic of the body, sexuality in the context of contemporary philosophy and life. They illustrate this project by the projects of different artists and different images which they collect. They discuss different ideas which provoke them in philosophical discourse for example Lacan, Deleuze etc

Katy Deepwell : And Gallery 21?

Irina Aktuganova: Gallery 21 is my baby. We had no idea when we organised this gallery, we had only desire. When we understood women in St Petersburg occupied the new media field we decided to conceptualise it and so we established the Cyber-Femin-Club. One year after Gallery 21 opened we involved women who wanted to deal with new technologies - artists, journalists, philosophers and other women. We organised workshops and showed videos and demonstrations of the internet. Some of the women learnt HTML and now make their own websites. We invited women artists and theoreticians to St Petersburg. Sanja Ivecovich, a Croatian videomaker, co-editor of a Croatian feminist magazine; Ann Hamilton, USA and Germany; and Francesca de Rimini from Australia to present work in Gallery 21. Women shared their experiences and idea. It was very interesting. Cyber-Femin-club is a project, it is not an organisation. We participated in Kathy Hoffman's Face Settings and mailing list and at the Documenta Cyberfeminist days in the Hybrid Workspace. Some of the other women I have not mentioned who we have invited to run workshops in the New Media Program include: Marietica Potaje (Slovenia); Ewa Wolgemuth (Austria); Katja Liberovskaja (Canada) and Olga Kisseliová (France). Earlier this year we organised a teleconference on Cyberfeminism with New York, NY-SPb. This new media space is an opportunity for women to communicate

independently and exchange their skills, self-articulations and creativity. It is a place to provide access to the internet and technologies, where men cannot interrupt us, where we can be really equal and promote our ideas.

Did you know women in Russia began organising in 1812? We have 200 years of feminism but little research has been written on Russian feminism. There is only one book by an American guy who created a history of Russian Feminism from 1812-1930. We have no history or researchers here in Russia who go deeply into these questions. They generally write about not even middle-class women but aristocrats and intellectuals who think about feminism. No one researches women's ideas, women's consciousness in the proletariat and the peasants. We don't know about our own history in Russia. Pushkin wrote in the early 19th Century in his book of poems how every educated man in Russia always discussed the women's problem. It was thought a good topic of conversation in the salons to discuss the position of women and every educated person he encouraged to think about this. We do have a lot of articles but no in-depth research. It would be interesting to have a history of women's ideas. There is a gender studies group in St Petersburg who make conferences, and have published readers in Russian however, their work tends to be more biographical than analytical.

Katy Deepwell: What do you hope for the Cyber-Femin-club and Gallery 21 in the future?

Irina Aktuganova: The future is unclear. I hope to continue our activity and to spend a long and happy life.

Galler y21 was situated at Pushkinsja Street 10, 191040, St Petersburg, Russia.

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