

Artist Initiatives in Moscow

Gillian McIver

Moscow is the only city in Russia right now that has enough money to support a thriving commercial art scene. This is not to say that art does not exist elsewhere, but in most cases there is just not the money circulating to support the familiar system of public and private galleries and artist-run centres feeding off each other to create a world-competitive art scene.

Aside from the main private venues such as the *Gallery Marat Guelman*, the *Regina Gallery* and the *XL Gallery*, the lifeblood of the arts in Moscow runs through the network of non-profit and artist-run initiatives that developed during the 1990s. These organisations are at the forefront in creating and promoting innovative work and supporting original, cutting-edge artists.

The non-profit *TV Gallery* promotes time-based video art and produces cultural programming about art for television. TV Gallery maintains an energetic programme of exhibitions, media production, single-channel and installation video, and vigorously promotes international exchanges. TV Gallery's director Nina Zaretskaya says:

"Our original mission was to connect the world of contemporary art and the artists with mass-media and new technologies, a task no one had actually done in Russia before. In the late 80s we began making TV programs about exhibitions and actions of contemporary art. At the same time there appeared an idea to open a non-profit centre—and so we used the same name: TV Gallery. Our goal is to develop new technologies in art, first of all to initiate, organize and promote video art."

While funding for projects comes from various grants and international institutes, TV Gallery's running expenses are also supported by the private means of the founders, as is the *Zverev Centre for Modern Art*. The Zverev Centre is a unique place: a former greenhouse that has been converted into a gallery in traditional rustic Russian architectural style, with a large garden used for performances and installations. The gallery comprises both the Zverev Museum and an artist-run contemporary art space for exhibitions, happenings and performance.

According to the Zverev Centre's founder Alexey Sosna, "we consider avant-garde art to be a special branch of academic art." The Zverev Museum is an academic institution which preserves, studies, authenticates and promotes the paintings of Anatoly Zverev (1931-1986), the "Russian Van Gogh." The artist-run space is curated and staffed by volunteers who programme

every kind of contemporary art, as well as supporting a renowned contemporary poetry society. The Centre presents a full programme of exhibitions and events throughout the season, and is particularly interested in presenting performative work.

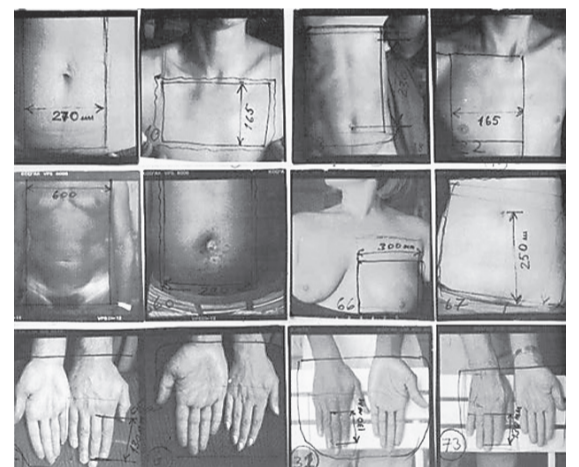
Under the Soviet system, modern art was the preserve of a huge network of institutions, the *National Centres for Contemporary Art* (NCCA's), which ran everything. During Perestroika and after, the system began to fall apart, and now, although there is a comprehensive network of often very fine branches of the NCCA's, the funding just is not in place to support them. In the early 90's the *Soros Centres for Contemporary Art* (SCCAs) and Soros funding programmes were set up by the financier George Soros. These SCCAs took up the slack from the state, and allowed "unofficial" art to flourish, financing up to 50% of the actual realised art projects in Russia. In 2000, however, the SCCA's were closed; artists are still reeling from the fallout of this decision.

Consequently, the network of small artist-run spaces run on a shoestring and supported by occasional grants, donations and gifts, is more crucial than ever to the development of contemporary art. The *Dom Kultury* venue hosts concerts of jazz and contemporary music, and runs a bar, which allows it to give a home to a small but important artist-run gallery upstairs. In recent years, *Spider and Mouse Gallery* and *Escape Gallery* have become very important institutions in Moscow. Both have extremely high reputations in the Moscow art world, and are increasingly becoming known internationally. *Spider and Mouse*, founded by Marina Perchikhina and Igor Ioganson, has a strong identity as a video gallery, but also presents mixed media projects: the curators support what is innovative, seeking fresh perspectives from across the country. The gallery is also active in international presentations and collaborations; Perchikhina in particular works extensively in Armenia, and the gallery has partnerships with artist-run centres in Stockholm.

Escape Gallery for years existed as a series of temporary galleries in different domestic apartments. As an artist-run enterprise, it exists for the artists to experiment, present and promote their work. It is well-known among the community of artists, critics and dealers, less so in the popular culture guides. Currently it has found a home in a tiny flat in a huge apartment block at Nagornaya, directly to the south of the city centre.

For artists, participation in exhibitions at any of the artist-run centres affords the opportunity to expose themselves in a supportive yet critically-demanding environment. The eventual hoped-for result, aside from sales or commissions, is to be asked to participate in a large, funded public art event, perhaps sponsored by Sony or Siemens, perhaps even abroad.

The main centre in Moscow for major public exhibition was always the *Central House of Artists*, which shares a building with the stunning collection of the Tretyakov National Art Museum's 20th century collection at *Krymsky Val*. Now most of it is given over to retail galleries of varying quality, and very conservative, boring exhibitions. However, in April the place comes to life with the annual "Art Moscow" art fair, which highlights some of the directions of contemporary art in Russia.





In yet another direction, *MediaArtLab* is also an artist-run centre, but it now exists in virtual space. It formed as a division of the SCCA to bring together practitioners in art, culture and media including new technology. Never solely concerned with art, it evolved, through its hosting of Internet-art projects, conferences and international multi-disciplinary projects, into one of the strongest media-cultural organisations in Europe. When the Moscow SCCA closed, *MediaArtLab* was left without a venue, and chose, at least for the present, to go virtual, concentrating on building and maintaining networks of practitioners to facilitate projects conferences and critical dialogues. In 2001 they hosted *MediaForum*, part of the Moscow International Film Festival, showing alternative video and new media. *MediaArtLab* is deeply concerned with issues surrounding new technology's impact upon general cultural processes, with issues of centralisation/decentralisation of culture in Russia, and in cross-dissemination of Russian and "foreign" ideas and cultural concepts.

The artist-run centres especially provide opportunities for artists from the provinces, offering them the opportunity to have their work seen and assessed. Though the art scene may be small and unfashionable, it takes art seriously. A vernissage for example, is less an opportunity to see and be seen than it is to argue and debate the finer points (the experience can be terrifying for the Western artist!).

One of the main differences between the life of the artist in Moscow and in the Western capitals, is that it is just not at all fashionable to be an artist in Russia. It is fashionable to be a businessman, a pop star, a sports hero—but not an artist. No-one goes to art school for fun or to be cool. No-one pursues art unless they really feel a desperate, burning drive to be an artist—and often not even then. Although there is rarely any money in art anywhere, this is even more the case in Russia. There are few rewards except integrity, passion and belief in the timeless value of making art.

Contacts:

Dom Kultury Arts Centre

Orchinnikovskiy Pereulok, 24/4
11318 Moscow
Metro: novokuznetskaia

Central House of Artists/New Tretyakov

Krymsky Val
Metro: Oktyabrskaya Sad

Art Media Centre "TV Gallery"

6, Bolshaya Yakimanka Str.,
109180 Moscow
Metro: Oktyabrskaya Sad
Tel.: (+7 095) 238 0269 Fax: (+7 095) 238 9666
<http://www.tvgallery.ru>

Zverev Center for Modern Art

Novoryazanskaia 29/2
Moscow 107066
Metro: Baumannskaya
095 265 6166

Gallery Guelman

7/7, building 5 Malaya Polianka Street
Moscow 109180
Metro Oktyabrskaya Sad or Polianka
Tel./fax (7- 095) 238-8492
e-mail: gallery@guelman.ru
<http://www.guelman.ru/>

Regina Gallery

1st Tverskaya-Yamskaya Street,
Moscow
(between Tverskaya and Teatrnaya Metro stations)
Leningradsky Prospect, 58 (in the yard)
Metro: Aeroport

Escape art space

Nagornaya Street 23, korp.2
Moscow 113186
tel. 095 127 0919
e-mail: ayzen_escape@mtu-net.ru
<http://www.escapeprogram.ru>

Spider and Mouse gallery

Leningradsky Prospect, 58 (in the yard)
Metro: Aeroport
Telephone: +07 095 287 13 60
e-mail: spmous@hotmail.com

Trash Art

<http://www.da-da-net.ru/TrashArt/bins.asp>