

**Global Feminisms
Comparative Case Studies of
Women's Activism and Scholarship**

RUSSIA

Natal'ia Iur'evna Kamenetskaia

Interviewed by Natalia Pushkareva

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Natal'ia Iur'evna Kamenetskaia was born in Moscow in 1959, and she received her education in art and art studies at the Department of Applied Arts at the Textile Academy (previously known as the Moscow Textile Institute). At the present time, she is an art historian, exhibition curator, author of critical articles on issues of women in art, and curator of international and regional art projects. She entered the history of Russian gender studies as one of the first organizers of feminist exhibitions and conferences on gender issues in Russia (1990-1992). In 1989, she founded *IdiomA*¹, the first feminist cultural laboratory of arts research in Russia.. The laboratory operated until 1996. From 1990 to the present, she has been an organizer and a participant in regional and international academic conferences; a developer of numerous educational programs, a curator of art exhibitions, and a member of editorial boards for academic collections and art catalogues. In 1993-1996 – she was the author and curator of the project "The Farewell of the Ages," which held exhibitions, conducted conferences, and published catalogues.

From 1994-2015 she was an instructor; a research fellow at the Educational and Academic Center of Informational and Educational Projects on Gender, Youth and Family Studies and the curator of art exhibitions at the Museum Center of the Russian State University for the Humanities². In 1999-2000 she served as coordinator and co-curator (with Anna Al'chuk) of the project "Gender Boundaries."³ In that same period, she was elected as Chairwoman of the Gender Section at the Russian Creative Artists Alliance.

From 2000 on she was a research fellow at the Art History Department of the Educational and Academic Center of Informational and Educational Projects on Gender, Youth and Family Studies of the Russian State Humanities University, the Chair of the Gender Section at the Russian Creative Artists Alliance⁴.

She is a co-founder and director-general of the independent non-profit cultural organization Creative Laboratory AAE (Art, Academics, Education).

She has been the author and curator of special projects on gender issues and intercultural collaboration in 6 Moscow bi-annuals on modern art, 2005-2015. She is also the creator (in collaboration with N.M. Yurasovskaya) and curator of the contemporary division at the exhibition "Art is Feminine. Female Artists in Russia of XV-XX Centuries," co-

¹ The first Russian feminist magazine which appeared only once in the journal *Heresies*. (Peeling Potatoes, Painting Pictures: Women Artists in Post-Soviet Russia By Renee Baigell, Matthew Baigell, 3/16/20)

² RSUH is a major university in Moscow and was founded in 1991. (RSUH, <https://www.rsuh.ru>, 3/6/20)

³ A project that archived feminist art. (TCXP, <http://old.tcxp.ru/Default.aspx?id=207>, 3/6/20)

⁴ The Alliance is an organization that brings together nearly 15,000 artists across Russia to support and promote the creative enterprise. They organize exhibits, publish books, and offer classes in different artistic media. Per the wording of the Alliance's website, the Gender Section promotes innovative projects addressing issues of women, gender, and family "in the polyethnic space of contemporary creative culture." (Russian Creative Artists Alliance, <http://www.tcxp.ru/sections/gendernaya-sekcija>, 4/6/20)

author of the book-catalogue (Moscow: The State Tretyakov Gallery, 2002), and creator and co-curator (with Oksana Sarkisyan) of the exhibition and catalogue "ZEN d'ART. Gender Art History in Post-Soviet Space⁵: 1989-2009". (Moscow: Moscow Museum of Modern Art, 2010)

Natal'ia L'vovna Pushkareva was born on September 23rd, 1959 in Moscow, Russia. She is currently a Professor, Chief Research Fellow, and the Head of the Womens and Gender Studies Department at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology at the Russian Academy of Sciences. Her fields of interest include gender history, history of family relations, the social anthropology of the academic community, as well as the history of sexuality in medieval, modern, and contemporary Russia. The chief editor of the yearbook *Sotsial'naiia istoriia (Social History)*, she also serves as president of the Russian Association for Research in Women's History. From 1981 to 2016, she has edited more than thirty essay collections, published dozens of articles for both academic and non-academic magazines, and written dictionary and encyclopedia entries as well as monographs. Pushkareva is considered to be a principal founder of the field of women's studies in Russia.

The Global Feminisms Project is a collaborative international oral history project that examines feminist activism, women's movements, and academic women's studies in sites around the world. Housed at the University of Michigan, the project was started in 2002 with a grant from the Rackham Graduate School. The virtual archive includes interviews from women activists and scholars from Brazil, China, India, Nicaragua, Poland, and the United States.

Our collaborator in Russia is Dr. Natalia L. Pushkareva, who gathered a diverse group of feminist scholar-activists and colleagues for the Russia portion of the Global Feminisms Project and conducted the majority of the interviews. Our work in Russia was supported by a Collaborative Planning Grant from University of Michigan's Institute for Research on Women and Gender.

⁵ An exhibit displayed between 1989 and 2009 that studied gender discourse and feminine status in post-soviet Russia. It followed "Women as Object and Subject of Art" and covered similar themes. (TCXP, <http://old.tcxp.ru/Default.aspx?id=207>, 3/6/20)

Key words:

Natal'ia Iur'evna Kamenetskaia is an artist, art critic, and curator of the first feminist art exhibitions in Russia; a specialist in the area of gender studies within the field of art history. Natal'ia, tell us about your life, about how you came to study feminist art.

NK: So none of it got recorded? This is just a nightmare! I'm not going to tell it all over again. But it all began when a colleague of mine—a former schoolmate—and I worked on an art journal of feminist criticism together with American colleagues, and it was interesting to study specifically women's art, to try to figure out what happened to it since the avant-garde⁶ period and why women's names disappeared from world art history afterward...

NP.: You began as an art historian?

NK: No, as an artist.

NP: So after you finished you high school, your education was in the arts?

NK: Yes, in the arts. I had an education in the arts; I was a member of the Youth Association of the Union of Artists of the USSR⁷, and I wasn't planning to enter a university or any sort of field.⁸ I showed my work at exhibitions, including international ones, and ahead lay the promise of a very interesting creative life and future, but it all fell apart because I became involved with this feminism. My life became fairly gray and shabby, as is the case, I think, for any scholar, researcher, and so on, because the work took up a great deal of time, a great deal of effort, without giving anything in return.

And on top of that, it went against my own interests—I became an experimental curator of art exhibitions, and I didn't feel comfortable trying to somehow place my own works into those exhibitions. Today it's become normalized, there are many people who are both curators and artists; things are back to that. But back then, there was a distinction, and it really hurt my career as an artist. Among other things, my financial situation got much worse. Because at the time, no one sponsored research in the spheres of art and artistic culture, and the American foundations, and everyone else, thought that in Russia it was enough to engage only with the social and economic problems, to support women in their struggle against domestic violence, things like that. Other spheres were considered too luxurious for post-Soviet space. It seems to be the case even now. So I took part in the first exhibitions...

⁶ A noun or adjective typically used in relation to new, or experimental art or artists. (Lexico Dictionary, <https://www.lexico.com>, 3/13/20)

⁷ A creative collective of artists and art critics who embraced the socialist values of the USSR. (Wikipedia Union of the USSR, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artists%27_Union_of_the_USSR, 4/6/20)

⁸ The Artist's Union of the USSR was founded in the 1930's and was a collective of artists from Moscow, Leningrad, and former members of the AKhRR (The Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia). The Union of Artist's was disbanded after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1992. ("Artists' Union of the USSR." Wikipedia. February 11, 2018. Accessed February 14, 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artists%27_Union_of_the_USSR.)

N.P.: When did they take place?

N.K.: My first exhibition—it was again a joint one with my classmate—I won't mention her now, she has written about herself everywhere already, so I won't mention her—I'm just so tired of...

NP: Where and when were your first exhibitions?

NK: It was on March 8, 1990, in a gallery called Sadovniki ("The Gardeners")⁹; it was called "Woman as Subject and Object in Art." It just came up: there was a conference at the House of Journalists¹⁰, and I just had to specify a date and time for the exhibition.

Yes, but the very first exhibition was in Leningrad¹¹, it was organized by Olesia Turkina and Viktor Mazin.¹² It was called "Women in Art."¹³ It wasn't very widely announced or publicized. We didn't even know about it, but when we were doing our research, when we were planning to organize that first feminist exhibition in Moscow and were writing the study "Woman as Object and Subject in Art,"¹⁴ men were also part of it... And we found out about them and invited them to participate in the Leningrad portion of the exhibition.

So it was made up of two parts: a Leningrad one and a Moscow one. The Moscow one was an international conference, we invited all the groups, feminist ones and others, all that existed, those that were first emerging from the underground back in 1990. Among the attendees was – what is her name, head of a foundation, a beauty, she lives in the United States now...

⁹ This looks to have been an exhibition space within the gallery "Na Kashirke" (meaning "on the Kashirka river") in Moscow.

(Na Kashirke Art Gallery, <https://www.nakashirke.com/>, 4/6/20)

¹⁰ Established in a building in Moscow in the late 18th century, the House of Journalists is a type of professional and cultural gathering spot for journalists. These kinds of institutions are common for different professions, especially more creative ones, in Russia. (So there's a House of Poets, a House of Writers, etc.) During the Soviet period these places became important instruments for controlling art and media. Access to the facilities was contingent on membership, which was granted by the Party. (Brendan Nieuburt, University of Michigan Libraries, 4/6/20)

¹¹ This city is Russia's cultural center, and is also known as Saint Petersburg.

(Wikipedia Saint Petersburg, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Petersburg, 3/6/20)

¹² Olesia Turkina and Viktor Mazin are both senior researchers at the Department of Contemporary Art in the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg.

¹³ An exhibit displayed in 1889 that studied gender discourse and feminine status in post-Soviet Russia. It is presented as the first exhibit of its kind and an inspiration for later events like Zen d'art. (TCXP, <http://old.tcxp.ru/Default.aspx?id=207>, 3/6/20)

¹⁴ NK misspeaks here. Earlier she called the exhibition "Woman as Subject and Object of Art." This exhibit's full title was *ZEN: Woman as Subject and Object in Art* or *Women as Objects*. It was shown in 1990 at the Sadovniki Gallery. This project displayed work created by both sexes, but replaced all of the artist's names with female pseudonyms. This challenged the viewer to reflect on gender stereotypes. The date of the exhibition was March 8th, International Women's Day. This is a state holiday in Russia that's celebrated rather enthusiastically. (TCXP, <http://old.tcxp.ru/Default.aspx?id=207>, 3/6/20)

NP: Anastasiia Posadskaia.¹⁵

NK: Right, Anastasiia Posadskaia. She came, with the group. It was called something then... And Ol'ga Lipovskaia¹⁶ came as well.

NP: From Petersburg.

NK: We invited writers from St. Petersburg, Marina Palei, and Natal'ia Malakhovskaia came for the first time. It was in 1990.¹⁷ It was the first time we got the opportunity to speak out, and she spoke well and often at the conference, everywhere. It was a very interesting exhibition, I think. All the artists that participated—from Saint-Petersburg (then Leningrad), from Moscow—they...

NP: What year was it again?

NK: 1990.

NP: 1990.

NK: You can get all the details from our book *Zen d'Art: History of Gender and Art in Post-Soviet Space*, published in 2010 by the Moscow Museum of Modern Art¹⁸.

N.P.: The first Russian publications on the history of Russian women's art, when do they date to?

N.K.: The first publications – that was our journal *IdiomA*, we were working on it then, and all these exhibitions around the same time.

NP: That's in the '90s?

¹⁵ Anastasia Ivanovna Posadskaia-Vanderbek was one of the founders of the Moscow Center for Gender Studies (MCGS) and served as its director from 1990-1994. She published several works, including *A Revolution of their Own: Voices of Women in Soviet History*. (Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movement, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=3000504>, 4/6/20) (NLR, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/l195/articles/anastasia-posadskaya-self-portrait-of-a-russian-feminist>, 4/6/20)

¹⁶ One of the founders, in 1990, of the Free Association of Women's Organizations (also known as SAFO, an acronym based on the Russian name *Svobodnaia assotsiatsiia feministikh organizatsii*) as well as the St. Petersburg Center for Gender Issues. She's published several books including "New Women's Organisations" and "The Mythology of Womanhood in Contemporary 'Soviet' Culture." (Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movement, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=3000504>, 4/6/20)

¹⁷ The period of time between the 1980's and early 90's in Russia was characterized by policy and leadership changes in the communist administration. The Soviet government began to collapse during this period of time and was officially dissolved in 1991. ("History of the Soviet Union (1982–91)." Wikipedia. December 02, 2017. Accessed December 03, 2017. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Soviet_Union_\(1982%E2%80%9391\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Soviet_Union_(1982%E2%80%9391)).)

¹⁸ This museum opened in 1999 and displays modern and contemporary art, including many of the exhibits listed in this transcript. (Wikipedia Moscow Museum of Modern Art, [en.wikipedia.org › wiki › Moscow Museum of Modern Art](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moscow_Museum_of_Modern_Art) [Moscow Museum of Modern Art - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moscow_Museum_of_Modern_Art), 3/13/20)

NK: The first issue of the journal came out in 1992. I still have it. It was a guest issue of the journal *Heresies*¹⁹—and also its last issue. It was a very well-known journal. For example, I was at an exhibition called “Elle” in the Centre Pompidou²⁰... It had the best, greatest trends, the best works of feminist female artists from around the world. And the journal *Heresies* was presented there. As I said, we made the very last issue. And then Lipovskaia and their group announced the creation (by the way, Natasha Filippova, the millionaire’s wife, was there) of the feminist organization SAFO.²¹

A year later, they decided to repeat the same thing and pretend it was another first... They created an organization, somewhere in Dubrovniki, or Dubrovniki something, I don’t recall²², with a really big budget, they got funding for all of that. Naturally, they didn’t invite us. And now Lipovskaia, when she talks about it, says that they created SAFO at that gathering. I told her that no, you created it for the second time then, you pretended that it was the first time...

So for the sake of fairness, we have to ask, why? Because that was a perfect example of how—and it’s still surprising to me now—as soon as a new generation tries to create feminist art and talk about it, it talks about the same things as if they’re doing it for the first time ever. It surprises me. If you take the developed countries, then the third wave of feminism – they went far ahead. They are concerned with totally different problems. Not just the kitchen or sex – that’s what continues here, and, strange as it seems, is financed by Western foundations... They keep spinning around at the same level, all these exhibitions. It’s already been said, the topic has already been covered... We, for instance, are interested in very different things by now. So then...

N.P.: Did only artists know about this exhibition and about SAFO? Or the whole of art society? Or did people in other fields also know about you?

N.K.: No, we gathered everyone then. Everyone. But all we had was enthusiasm. The A Ia society helped us then, and we got a little help with the journal from the Soros Foundation²³, I don’t remember what it was called back then.

NP: “Open Society”?

¹⁹ An American journal that discussed feminist topics in art and politics. It was published between 1977 and 1993. (Wikipedia Heresies, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics>, 3/16/20)

²⁰ This large building in the center of Paris houses the Musée National d’Art Moderne, which is the largest museum for modern art in Europe. (Wikipedia Centre Popidou, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Centre_Pompidou, 3/16/20)

²¹ SAFO was a women’s organization in Russia that supported lesbian rights and sponsored activities and lectures for the lesbian community. (Noonan, Norma Corigliano, and Carol Nechemias, eds. Encyclopedia of Russian Women’s Movements. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001.)

²² NK is referring to Dubna outside Moscow.

²³ The Soros Foundations, or Open Society Foundations, is a network of initiatives that fund and support the arts, legal reform, economic reforms, education, health care, etc. The locations they focus on are Europe, Russia, Southern Africa, Haiti, etc. (Open Society Foundation Website, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org>, 3/16/20)

NK: No, “Open Society” was a later name.²⁴ At the time it was near the Komsomol’skaia or Lermontovskaia subway stop . . . They were located in some alley there. At the time, Viacheslav Glazychev was the director there; he died not long ago.²⁵ And they supported us, but it wasn’t really money... Later, there was a whole story with the journal, when Soros refused to contribute more funding, and our journal almost shut down. And then *Heresies* offered to work on the journal jointly.

There was a fairly difficult journey to the United States to print the journal. We wanted to arrive there with the journal, but it turned out to be impossible to print it here (that issue ended up different than what it had been originally). For example, the Swedes had sent us paper—back then there were problems with paper in Russia, in Moscow—to use for printing.

NP: A little louder, please.

NK: They sent us torchon—it’s a kind of paper, of very high quality. It was supposed to come from Sweden by boat, to St. Petersburg—that is, Leningrad. So I and Irina Sandomirskaia²⁶ got tickets and rushed to Leningrad in order to pick up this paper. It turned out that the boat was leaving in the evening, and in a space of a few hours, we had to show some sort of letter so that they could give us the paper, and we had to run to the St. Petersburg branch of the A la society, and they gave us some documents, and we arrived, and they unloaded the cargo, and then we found a car, some sort of a truck, and sent all that paper (there was a ton of it) off, and then got on a train. Here the paper was received by the representatives of a printing house, who promised that they would print everything for us, and these representatives took our paper and put it somewhere.

So we went—there was someone called Ivanov, a great guy, he was in charge of various technical matters at the Soros Foundation—we went to this Ivanov to ask for help, because it was, after all, our project, so things were taken from all of us. He got the phone number for the director of some privately-owned printing house, called them. Then told us: just goes to show. We said: show what? Something along the lines of how a woman can’t just go and do something like that, especially in the conditions of early capitalism that was just beginning to develop in the country. He called them and said: “thanks for keeping our paper.” And they immediately gave it back to him. It was put in the Soros warehouse and we realized then that we wouldn’t be able to print anything in Moscow because they said they wouldn’t give us money for the printing itself. So we went to the United States with the layout, with materials, to ask there...

²⁴ Open Society Foundations is a philanthropic organization founded by George Soros that supports civil society groups projects with the aims of promoting justice, education, and social welfare. (“Open Society Foundations.” Wikipedia. February 13, 2018. Accessed February 15, 2018. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_Society_Foundations.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_Society_Foundations))

²⁵ Viacheslav Glazychev was a doctor of art history, professor at the Moscow Architectural Institute, later director of the Institute of Innovation Promotion of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation.

²⁶ Irina Sandomirskaia is a philologist and now a professor at the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies at Södertörn University in Sweden.

N.P.: What was included in this first issue?

N.K.: Here, I have it!

NP: Well, just tell us briefly.

NK: It had our articles, materials from the exhibitions – by that time we had organized three or four feminist art shows.

NP: [inaudible]... Well, of course, they had a general orientation precisely toward that...

NK: There was an interview with Aleksandra Korsakova,²⁷ conference talks, a concert – well, not a concert, but rather performances by conceptualist poets, they gave us their poems about the women’s movement, art... by men and women. There was Dmitrii Prigov (we even have Prigov’s photographs) and Vladimir Sorokin.²⁸ Sorokin gave us his work...²⁹

NP: This was all at the beginning of the ‘90s? You’re talking about that time?

NK: I’m talking just about the year 1990!

NP: 1990.

NK: When we went – it was the first issue, we put it together. Overall it was really great, as I have now realized. Maybe it was even more interesting than this quite academic one that we published later.

N.P.: And what was this first issue... err this journal called later?

N.K.: We named it *IdiomA*. Why did we call it *IdimoA*? The word just came to me, and I liked it a lot. Because in some way it sounded similar to “idiot,” and our beginnings were very close to that... And we intentionally put a capital “A” at the end. You’ll see it in this issue – the capital “A” is still there. In other words, you can read the word one as having two beginnings...

²⁷ Aleksandra Korsakova-Rudovich was an artist, designer, and dancer and worked under her late husband, Vladimir Tatlin. (Strigalev, Anatolii. "Alexandra Korsakova-Rudovich." *Experiment*. January 01, 1996. Accessed February 15, 2018.

[http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/journals/10.1163/2211730x96x00135. \)](http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/journals/10.1163/2211730x96x00135.)

²⁸ Dmitrii Prigov was a Russian artist who challenged the norms of Soviet Russia through several mediums, including graphic art, writing, sculpture, media and more. Prigov also performed his poetry and other works in such a way as to convey a complex and sometimes mystical message. (Gallery, Saatchi. "Dmitry Prigov." *Dmitry Prigov - Artist's Profile - The Saatchi Gallery*. Accessed February 15, 2018.

http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/dmitry_prigov.htm.)

²⁹ Vladimir Sorokin is known as a writer of postmodern fictions that shocked readers through satire, scatology, violence and politically dystopian tropes. Much of his work addresses Russian history and culture, especially during the pre- and post- Soviet periods. ("Vladimir Sorokin." *ReadRussia*. Accessed February 15, 2018. <http://readrussia.org/writers/writer/vladimir-sorokin>.)

N.P.: Did your involvement with this topic influence your personal life, your biography, your future?

N.K.: Probably, yes. What I mean to say is... I don't know how my life would've turned out otherwise. I most likely wouldn't be living here, because I was invited to different programs, artist residencies. Most likely, if I hadn't gotten mired in the journal back then, then probably. But, really, no one knows what would have happened. So it's difficult to talk about it after the fact.

N.P.: And your choice of this particular path, the study of women's and feminist movements?

N.K.: I didn't think that...

NP: That time wasn't dangerous?

NK: I didn't know that it would be long-term. So that's why. Later we organized... later we organized an exhibition called "Femininity and Power,"³⁰ it touched on questions of power as masculine power, not just as . . . well, in terms of the social aspect, it was built on Lacan's theory that power consists not only of vertical but also horizontal relations.³¹ We called it "Femininity and Power." Kulik³² was the designer we invited, he suggested the idea of having coat hangers, like in a wardrobe, and the women's art would hang on them, and that's how it would be brought out of the confines of the wardrobe. And so that's what we used, they were specially ordered... This exhibition was at the Central House of Art Workers³³, and by the way, it was really great—I understand this now—and it included work by the late Korsakova (the widow of Tatlin)—we devoted a whole section to her. She committed suicide around that time.

And it was stolen! Do you know why the first issue of our journal changed so much? All the materials from our car were stolen in New York. I think it was the hand of fate. Because we lost the interviews, tape recordings, video—that whole exhibition—there was only one video, from Austrian television. At the time, there were no capabilities in our country—and it was also difficult in other countries—to make a copy. Austrian television made a video of our first exhibition-conference, and they gave us that tape. We took it with us to America.

³⁰ Russian title was *Zhenstvennost' i vlast.* This was another art exhibit in a similar vein to "Women as Object and Subject of Art." It first appeared in 1991 in Moscow's Central House of Art Workers. Its aim was to strengthen women's position in culture and society, while simultaneously furthering feminist analyses. (TCXP, <http://old.tcxp.ru/Default.aspx?id=207>, 3/6/20)

³¹ Jaques Lacan was a French psychoanalyst that sought to reconstruct "the Freudian Field" by exploring the notion of the "unconscious" across different theories, analyses, and disciplines. (Encyclopedia of Philosophy. April 02, 2013. Accessed February 15, 2018. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/lacan/>)

³² Jauhien Kulik was a Belarusian artist and graphic designer. He designed Belarus's new coat of arms. (Wikipedia Jauhien Kulik, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jauhien_Kulik. 3/16/20)

³³ The Central House of Artists is another collective like the House of Artists. It was established in 1930 in Moscow. Similar in spirit to the House of Journalists, it's a gathering place for artists where they can collectively inspire, promote, and exhibit their work. (Central House of Artists Website, <https://cdri.ru/>, 4/6/20)

But Alla Efimova and Lev Manovich...³⁴ They... We were going to Rochester University, we gave a couple lectures there, told our story . . . We were looking for sponsors, and then we went... Right, the Chinese printers. We found a Chinese printing house. We didn't have enough... We had to find another thousand dollars (they found us sponsors for three thousand, and we had to find one more). The Chinese printers were willing to print our journal. Because we couldn't do it here in Russia. But then something unexpected happened: all our materials were stolen. So we got to New York from Rochester! And Sandomirskaia and I didn't know, but Efimova and Manovich should have know that you can't leave anything in your car. Especially near the rear window. They left the car by Columbia University and we went to go sleep. Sandomirskaia and I had got there separately towards night. And they told us that they'd leave the stuff in the car and deal with it in the morning. And they go back to their care in the morning, and all our suitcases were gone, , the window was smashed, they took everything. They took the gifts, the clothes, fine, that's one thing - but they also took all the materials that...

NP: That were gathered so painstakingly.

NK: We looked for them because we thought maybe they'd get tossed out. They weren't valuable. We looked in the trash dumps around there, went through all the garbage, but didn't find anything.

NP: And what happened after the first issue, how long did the journal exist?

N.K.: For another two years... We wanted to do exhibitions, to show feminist art. There was an episode with Norton Dodge, who came.³⁵ We told him – Norton Dodge was a collector of Russian art; there's that Museum of Norton Dodge.³⁶ He became interested in our women's art, our projects, and came to meet us in New York. But Cynthia, with whom we were staying in New York, said, "I am a leftist liberal, and so on, and I don't want rich people in my house. So Norton Dodge won't be allowed in." We felt very embarrassed, but we told Dodge that the owner won't be there, so we'll wait for him outside by the entrance. Then, when we came out to wait, Irina Sandomirskaia said to me, "Let's pretend we're not waiting for him!" I don't know why she said that. So we started strolling about with an air of detachment. While we were strolling, it turned out, he came, rang the bell, as Cynthia informed us, left an irate message on the intercom that he came but no one was there, and left. It is such an incredible story how we missed Norton Dodge, and after that—even though we called, apologized—he never reappeared. I think that...

³⁴ Lev Zakharovich Manovich is a theorist of digital culture and new media, a professor of computer science at CUNY, and the author of several books.

Alla Efimova compiled, edited, and translated with Lev Manovich a collection of essays that was published in 1993. See *Tekstura: Russian Essays on Visual Culture*. Ed. By Alla Efimova and Lev Manovich. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

³⁵ Norton Townshend Dodge (1927-2011) was an American economist and art collector.

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The Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers. (Wikipedia Norton Dodge, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norton_Dodge, 3/16/20)

NP: So who was the sponsor of the journal then?

NK: *Heresies*. They took us on as a guest issue, we didn't get a penny from them. They got everything for free. But that was the agreement. We provided the materials, they found their sponsors – it's a non-commercial journal, they didn't pay the writers. They themselves probably got something, I don't know. But look, for instance, at Jo Anna Isaak³⁷, when she was writing the introductory article, she made a point of traveling to Moscow, she visited everyone, looked around.

N.P.: What kind of topics did the journal cover?

N.K.: It had a bit of an historical angle - it was about the avant-garde women artists... Where, I guess, Pavel Bezdorny and so on. But there's no way you're not asking him... Yes. Well, it described the first feminist exhibitions in Russia, there was something about the "Working Woman" exhibition. That is, something about the Leningrad part, and the "Working Woman" exhibition... it was done by Anna Al'chuk and Elena Romanova³⁸. They were conceptualists.

NP: This is in the mid-1990s?

NK: I think it was also in 1990, in the fall. About the first such exhibitions, about the issues, about the linguistic aspects. Sandomirskaia worked on topics like that, about the abolition of the *yat* letter³⁹, the hard sign as a masculine ending,⁴⁰ about the first decrees of the Soviet government—the ones that broke down the fundamentals of gender⁴¹—she

³⁷ She is a professor at Rutgers University and an author of literature focusing on contemporary art. (Fordham University, https://www.fordham.edu/info/22091/faculty_and_staff/5669/jo_anna_isaak, 3/18/20)

³⁸ Successful artists in Russia. (Wikipedia Anna Al'Chuck and Elena Romanova, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anna_Alchuk and <https://soviet-art.ru/soviet-artist-elena-romanova/>, 3/18/20)

³⁹ *Yat* was a letter in the Cyrillic alphabet (on which Russian is based). The letter looked like this: ѣ, and made the sound "ya." However, the letter was eliminated from the alphabet in reforms that simplified Russian spelling and writing (orthographic reforms) shortly after the 1917 Revolution. "Yat"'s sound function was given over the letter "e" (pronounced "ye"). (Brendan Nieuburt, University of Michigan Libraries, 4/6/20)

⁴⁰ In the early 1900's, Russia went through a period of orthographic reform where the ѣ (*yat*), ѐ (*fitá*), and і (dotted i) letters and sounds were removed from the language. This reform brought about a series of social and linguistical debates regarding the impact that language change would have on Russian culture and heritage. ("No Pushkin without Yat." Languagehat.com. Accessed February 22, 2018. <http://languagehat.com/no-pushkin-without-yat/>.)

⁴¹ Possibly referencing the series of Bolshevik legislative decrees instituted by the Soviet government after the 1917 revolution. Vladimir Lenin aimed to establish equality of the sexes through the Bolshevik party and maintained a higher number of female delegates within the party. The party attached great importance to the woman's struggle in Russia and sought to organize them within working-class organizations. (Frederiksen, Marie. "Women before, during and after the Russian Revolution." In *Defense of October*. March 10, 2017. Accessed February 15, 2018. <http://www.bolshevik.info/women-before-during-and-after-the-russian-revolution.htm>.)

connected all this to the GULAG,⁴² the difference in the containment of men and women. She gave a lot of lectures about this later, when we traveled to Sweden.

N.P.: In other words, the 1990s were marked first by *IdiomA*, then *Heresies*?

N.K.: That's actually how the cover had it: *Heresies/IdiomA*. It was the only issue. Then they didn't... The next one happened without Sandomirskaia. We organized an *IdiomA* laboratory, around the same time we began collaborating with the Russian State University for the Humanities, we worked on the gender section of the "Postmodernism" conference with the Tretyakov Gallery⁴³.

NP: This is which years?

NK: I think it was 1993.

N.P.: At that time, the country is going through so much change, the Soviet Union falls apart, then the entire socialist system falls apart, but somehow you aren't very affected by that – art history ...

N.K.: It did affect us very much, something always happened whenever we got back from somewhere! For instance, in 1991, we organized an exhibition in Sweden, together with Swedish artists; it was called *Hinderloppen*, it means an "obstacle race." And we worked together – women artists from here and myself and Talantova went there to work with Swedish artists, and there was a conference, Germaine Greer came.⁴⁴ It took place there, and we gave talks in Stockholm and in Lund. It was in 1991. Then the Swedish artists came here, I'd forgotten about that, but one of our artists reminded me recently. And we

⁴² The GULAG was an administrative department of the Soviet government that maintained a series of prisons and forced labor in the 1930's. ("Gulag." Dictionary.com. Accessed February 15, 2018. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/gulag>.)

⁴³ An art gallery and museum in Moscow that refers to itself as "the main museum of Russian national art". (Tretyakov Gallery, <https://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/en/about/mission/>, 3/18/20)

⁴⁴ Germaine Greer is an Australian writer, a major voice in the second-wave feminist movement. Her work touches on topics such as feminism, nature, and developing the "woman's identity" independently from the goal of gaining "equality" with men. ("Germaine Greer." Wikipedia. February 15, 2018. Accessed February 15, 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Germaine_Greer.)

organized an exhibition with them here as well. Then Nadezhda Azhgikhina⁴⁵ invited us.⁴⁶ 1992, the project was “Arcana Number Zero.”⁴⁷

NP: Azhgikhina was the head of the gender section too?

NK: Her? No. She had just got involved. She worked for the magazine *Ogoniok* then.⁴⁸ And in 1992 they hosted a conference called “Russian Culture and Subculture at the Turn of the 2000s.” And during the conference she suggested that we organize an exhibition; we had it at the Central House of Artists. I called it “Arcana Number Zero” – I was already a curator of exhibitions by then. I was no longer...

NP: How did you say it was called?

NK: “Arcana Number Zero.”

NP: “Arcana Number Zero,” right?

NK: Yes, I was and still am interested in Tarot and other such structural things, and it’s sort of that which exists beyond the limit of the rational mind. It’s like—on the one hand, there is women’s art—women artists are not considered entirely normal; and second, artists in general are not considered entirely normal. So it’s a sort of a double thing. Oh and, third, there was the specific intent to show some kinds of transcendental states—projects or something else—that, for the artist, would be considered some sort of an idea that goes beyond common sense and reality.

N.P.: So the entire 1990-2000 period, for you, involved both working as a practicing artist and at the same time investigating how a woman is represented in art and how she expresses herself?

N.K.: Yes. There actually were many exhibitions. When we were organizing a retrospective at GUM,⁴⁹ it turned out that there are many of us, that there are different groups, in

⁴⁵ She works at the renowned Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. She is a curator, art historian, and critic specializing in female artists and the female as subject in art. She was also coeditor of the catalogue *Art of the Female Sex/Femme Art*, and curated an exhibit called [The Nude in Russian Art in the 20th Century](https://www.tretyakovgallerymagazine.com/articles/1-2015-46/nude-russian-art-20th-century). (Tretyakov Gallery, <https://www.tretyakovgallerymagazine.com/articles/1-2015-46/nude-russian-art-20th-century>, 3/16/20)

⁴⁶ Nadezhda Azhgikhina is a journalist who has served as the Vice President of the European Federation of Journalists, in the Russian Writers Union, Russian Pen, and the Gender Council of the International Federation of Journalists. She has worked for a number of international organizations including UNESCO, UN Women, and WHO to publish articles and projects regarding gender and journalists’ rights. (Azhgikhina, Nadezhda. “Nadezhda Azhgikhina.” *The Nation*. December 01, 2017. Accessed February 15, 2018. [https://www.thenation.com/authors/nadezhda-azhgikhina/.](https://www.thenation.com/authors/nadezhda-azhgikhina/))

⁴⁷ Also known as “0 Arcana”, this exhibit was displayed in the Central House of Artists in 1992. (TCXP, <http://old.tcxp.ru/Default.aspx?id=207>, 3/6/20)

⁴⁸ *Ogoniok* was one of the oldest illustrated print magazines in Russia. It was a very popular form of media during Perestroika. (“Translations for *Ogoniok*.” What does *ogoniok* mean? Accessed February 15, 2018. <https://www.definitions.net/definition/ogoniok>.)

⁴⁹ GUM, an acronym for *Glavnyi universal’nyi magazin*, literally “main universal store,” is a large mall in Moscow, situated on the other side of Red Square from the Kremlin.

Petersburg, small groups, very interesting projects, and this added up to whole narratives.⁵⁰ There really were fantastic works, and projects, and exhibitions – we put it all together.

N.P.: Is there anyone now compiling all of this? Are there historians of this women's art?

N.K.: I guess that's me because that's... You didn't have this book, right? Unfortunately, I can't give it to you... I have four, I think, copies left, but I'll show it to you. The book was quite academic, there was a research department that was working with us. Andrei Tolstoi⁵¹ was in charge of it, Galina Ivanovna Zvereva⁵² was an academic consultant, and so on, and as a result the book turned out to be quite academic. But before then, in 2002, I suggested an exhibition to the Tretyakov Gallery. And we put together the first large-scale exhibition—you probably know it—"Femme Art."⁵³ I was recently at a conference in London, and somebody gave a talk there, she teaches there now, at that college... What's it called? That famous one in London? Do you recall?

NP: There are a lot of famous colleges in London.

NK: But this one is really famous. So it turns out that this book of ours is their main resource when they study Russian art history, specifically women's art. There were different departments involved, all kinds of true specialists—in the Baroque, postmodernism, modernism, the fifteenth century, icons—they wrote all these articles, so really it was a great scholarly effort. I think back on it now and am surprised that I could put together something like that.

N.P.: How was this idea born?

N.K.: The idea... It was born several times. First, we—there was this art historian, Nadezhda Iurasovskaia—wanted to do something like that with the Tretyakov Gallery. Iurasovskaia and I first organized it together, worked on it. I participated in it; it was called: "Postmodernism and National Culture: The Farewell of the Ages." We put together a seminar, and stayed in touch, and this exhibition – she wanted to do something of this sort.

⁵⁰ GUM is the largest department store in the areas of the former Soviet Union. It is unique in the fact that it is more than just a department store, but also a place for popular culture and gatherings. ("GUM. TIMELINE." Accessed February 15, 2018.)

⁵¹ Andrei Tolstoi

Tolstoi has a Doctor of Arts and is the director of the Research Institute of Theory and History of Fine Arts of the Russian Academy of Fine Arts. He specializes in twentieth and twenty-first century Russian art. (Brookly Rail, <https://brooklynrail.org/contributor/andrei-tolstoj>, 3/16/20)

⁵² Dean of the Cultural Studies Department at the Russian State University for the Humanities. He primarily worked with the sub-department for the History and Theory of Culture. (Russian State University of Humanities, <https://www.rsu.ru/>, 4/6/20)

⁵³ Kamenskaya, N. & Iovleva, L. (2002). *Femme Art: Women Painting in Russia: XV-XX Centuries*. Moscow: INO and State Tretyakov Gallery. This work was displayed in Moscow in 2002. It explores new aspects of the relationship between gender and Russian history by displaying artist's work categorized by gender. (TCXP, <http://old.tcxp.ru/Default.aspx?id=207>, 3/6/20)

So I thought about it and decided that we really could take up this topic, so we put together a proposal. We went to see Elena Kochkina.⁵⁴ At first we wanted to call it “The Anthology of Femininity” ...

N.P.: So you got assistance from the Open Society, the Soros Foundation?

N.K.: At that time, yes, it was already called “Open Society.” We went to Elena Kochkina, and I should add that she was the only person who saw value in this idea and became interested in it. And she presented it to Ekaterina Genieva⁵⁵ and Soros.

You might be asking why *Heresies* took us then, and what happened with Soros and the journal...? And also how did we manage to get the last thousand, and how did the other three thousand that we had been promised fall through? Well, it’s because we called, and Soros said that he wasn’t very interested in women’s art, in all these ideas in general, he said so to his young assistant in the New York office when we stopped by there. And he refused to give us that thousand. But his assistant nevertheless seemed to promise directly to us that everything would be okay. He wanted to show off and show that he helped somehow. So he called Moscow, again that same Ivanov, in the Moscow office.

And in Moscow they said no problem, they’ll publish it here, and they asked why we had left? That is, they said that they’ll publish it, and that it’ll cost only around \$500 to publish it here. And so we thought that everything would be worked out just like that. And the assistant said that he called our sponsors: “everything’s fine, we found a solution to the problem!” Yes, we lost that three thousand dollars, and so we understood that they wouldn’t print it—because they didn’t print it here in Moscow, or we would have arrived in America with a journal. After all, we wanted to organize an exhibition, not to print a journal there. But then we lucked out. We visited these American art critics, feminists (they invited us!), and we told them this whole story with Soros. They liked the story so much because it turned out that Soros was... I don’t know why Soros... So then Soros organized a women’s network program, perhaps under the pressure of contemporary trends, demands, and so on. But these American critics told us back then that he didn’t have much regard for women and women’s projects, that his wife gives miniscule amounts to culture, crumbs from his millions. But they offered us another option because they liked our story so much. And I said no, we couldn’t agree to that option because that would mean that we had traveled for nothing, wasted money – that it would all be for nothing, we’d end up where we’d started. And we made, as it later turned out, the right decision. And then later, when we came with a group of different artists, Sandomirskaia wasn’t with us by then, we came to the Russian State University for the Humanities. We were invited by Liusia Skvortsova. You know her,

⁵⁴ Elena Kochkina at this time was the head of the Gender Program of the Soros Foundation in Russia. The Global Feminisms Project also has an interview with her.

⁵⁵ Ekaterina Iur’evna Genieva (1946-2015) was a Soviet and Russian philologist who the director-general of the All-Russian Library of Foreign Literature from 1993 to 2015. In 1997 she became the President of the Russian Soros Foundation (“Open Society”).

right? Yes, she came and invited me, introduced me to Belaia,⁵⁶ I invited some other people – and we organized a sort of laboratory at RSUH (at first it was a free laboratory).

NP: What was it called?

NK: It was called “Idioma.” Echoing that one title. And that’s where we organized “Farewell of the Ages,” completely free, they took us on as an unpaid substructure. And then a year later we made an agreement with Galina Ivanovna Zvereva at the department of history and theory of culture to work for some compensation. There were some details. And she introduced us there to Krasimira Liubenovna Lukicheva.⁵⁷ And somehow this laboratory of ours... Either the higher-level women’s courses fell through (it was first organized as part of the higher-level women’s courses), or something happened there and they couldn’t continue their existence... Belaia turned them down, and then I officially joined the Department of History and Theory of Art at RSUH, either full time or part time, I don’t remember...

N.P.: And this offered you the opportunity to continue research work?

N.K: Yes. Well, actually all members of our group were somehow in various official positions. Mainly we organized exhibitions there. In 1995, we put together the first large conference, which included an exhibition. The exhibition was—well, I don’t remember—but the conference was large. It was called “The Shift of Cultural Paradigms: Roles and Variations.” It was in 1995 and included artists from Petersburg, art historians, male artists, female artists; it really was great. There were these wonderful video screenings... and in general it was an incredible conference.

N.P.: Was it connected to those “gender ‘90s,” when Western and other foundations actively supported various directions of gender-research development, including those in art history or was it just...?

N.K.: We were never supported, we never had any money! I don’t remember any instances when I or my projects were supported in those years. I remember that no matter who I talked to, I always said: All these gender studies of yours, tailored from western patterns, they’ll fall apart! Because you do all of it on such a low, primitive level. So far you have nothing developing, all these scaffolds aren’t forming, aren’t being studied, nothing is happening!” Figuratively speaking, things like offering some bread, doing something simple and concrete – sure... But in the end, they were just dividing up the money! In the end, that’s what happened.

Where are all these organizations now...? There was even something with the government, do you remember the Committee for Public Relations had something set up for women? They always wanted something, they kept calling me, asking, women’s projects and so on... And the end result was that they’d just divide up some money and do who knows what.

⁵⁶ Galina Andreevna Belaia is a professor, philology PhD, and provost of the Russian State University for the Humanities.

⁵⁷ Krasimira Liubenovna Lukicheva is a Candidate of Science in Art History, Assistant Professor and Department Chair in the Department of Theory and History of Art at the Russian State Humanities University.

N.P.: Were any Western women’s organizations in contact with you at the time? Did you yourself look for opportunities to get in touch with them?

N.K.: Personally, I was always in contact with both artists and art historians...

NP: As an individual or through an organization?

NK: As an individual, we received materials, participation, and that’s all.

NP: Mostly from America or from where?

NK: Well, no, we had... Well, we had help from Swedes and Americans. But then... When you start bringing your colleagues somewhere, they pull the blanket that’s on both of you over their feet and... change the situation. That’s how we lost contact with the Swedes, even though we started the contacts, well not us, they themselves called us first from the embassy, they’d heard about the magazine, and we did a lot there, but the embassy didn’t support us financially, just showed interest, participated, invited us... Later they’d call us through an intermediary. Then they brought in Backstein⁵⁸ – and then it was Backstein, not us, who organized some sort of a large women’s exhibition...⁵⁹ In other words, as soon as money came into play, suddenly there appeared people who knew how to get everything into their hands. So we never really received anything.

Looking back, I think that we always managed to find some way to put together [a good exhibition]. So the Soros Foundation and its Women’s network program, they gave us money for a catalog. Did I get any money? I was paid an honorarium⁶⁰ for an article that I wrote. And then, when it came to the exhibition itself, the Tretyakov Gallery had its own sponsors. We didn’t get paid as curators or as artists; the project definitely did not enrich us. On top of that, even the copyright in my and the organization’s name was only kept thanks to Lidiia Ivanovna Iovleva, who was the deputy director; the director wanted to have it in the name of the State Tretyakov Gallery, breaking all agreements that we had. We even had a letter of support from Hillary Clinton. Just think about it: she is about to become president...

N.P.: But you don’t have that letter anymore?

N.K.: Not the original, but it was printed in the catalog with her signature, so in that sense yes. We couldn’t have kept the original – we carelessly gave all the materials and documents to the Gallery, and actually Rodionov didn’t allow it to be placed first...⁶¹

NP: Wait, who is this?

⁵⁸ Joseph Backstein is the curator of over 30 exhibits. He is the artistic director of the Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art and has a PhD in Sociology of Arts and Culture. (Calvert Journal, <https://www.calvertjournal.com/contributors/show/625/joseph-backstein>, 3/20/20)

⁵⁹ Iosif Markovich Bakhshstein (b. 1945) is a Russian art historian, art critic, and curator of exhibitions. He is the Director of the Institute of Issues of Contemporary Art in Moscow.

⁶⁰ A gift of money for services that don’t necessarily require payment. Examples include guest speakers, coaches, wedding officiants, etc. (Wikipedia Honorarium, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honorarium>, 3/20/20)

⁶¹ Valetin Alekseevich Rodionov was the director of the State Tretyakov Gallery.

NK: This is the director of the State Tretyakov Gallery, and he said something about how the Soviet people have their own pride. So in the end, these western foundations, did they really help us? It's good that the catalog was at least published.

NP: What year did the book, *Femme Art*, come out?

NK: In 2002.

NP: In 2002.

NK: We'd done a lot before 2002...

NP: Few that made a name for themselves like this one?

NK: We did other project before, yes, but those were more intellectual. There was the "Femininity and Power" exhibition, then "Gender Boundaries," it was 1998-1999. And in 1995 I organized an exhibition called "Apocalypse," in which both men and women participated; we didn't present it as gender-based. There were a lot of different interesting projects that became part of this book. And weren't realized...

N.P.: Where did these exhibitions take place? How did you manage to find venues to...?

N.K.: A lot of them took place in the Sadovniki Gallery. The exhibition "Femininity and Power" was in the Central House of Art Workers. Every time—I guess it was fate—every time someone appeared and said, "How about we do exhibitions in this place?"

N.P.: Who made the call that the exhibition would be hosted by the Tretyakov Gallery? Who made the decision and who got it done? After all, the Gallery never hosted exhibitions like that before.

N.K.: Well, first of all, don't underestimate my energy. By that point, I had done so much that, in a way, I gathered a lot of potential energy. And then I just laid out how it was going to happen. And it all came together how it all came together. That is, I went to Elena Kochkina⁶², we figured things out with her—you know how it is, shuttle diplomacy. Dar'ia Iurasovskaia put it together. We wrote a letter to Rodionov and brought Elena to him. Elena Kochkina came wearing earrings, glamorous, looking like a million bucks and then said that the Soros Foundation would give its agreement and support, so she right away got him with the money... The Soros Foundation did not end up giving as much as she had promised Rodionov, but we did manage to at least get something for the catalog. Then came Lidia Ivanovna Iovleva; she's just an extraordinary person. She could probably be compared to Antonova.⁶³ Though she is about ten years younger. She was always the deputy director. Unlike at the Pushkin Museum⁶⁴, where the main personality was always Antonova, the

⁶² Kochkina has worked in gender research since 1990. She's a professor at the Institute of Social and Economic Studies of the Population at the Russian Academy of Sciences. She also has an interview on record with The Global Feminisms Project. (Global Feminisms Projects, <https://globalfeminisms.umich.edu/en/russia>, 3/6/20)

⁶³ Irina Aleksandrovna Antonova is the Director of the Pushkin Museum in Moscow.

⁶⁴ The largest European art museum in Moscow. It's named to honor the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin. (Pushkin Museum, <https://pushkinmuseum.art/index.php?lang=en>)

director, while the rest of the staff completely depended on her, here, as far as I understand, all the directors were either incompetent, or maybe mediocre, or temporary, or appointed, sometimes a bit dumb... Though I think I heard someone was okay... But Lidiia Ivanovna was always there, and she was incredible, and still is to this day. She knew what is kept in which museum, which works, and in general she sort of reigned there... And Iurasovskaia was a little afraid of her. She thought that the exhibition should be planned without her, but of course we called her, and she became really interested in all this. And in the future she supported us very strongly. Especially when... I had this idea—we all back when wanted to create a museum of women’s art, so I had an idea—the Washington Museum. Wilhelmina Holladay⁶⁵ came to the Washington Museum.

NP: The Museum of Women’s Art.

NK. Yes. The Washington Museum of Women’s Art... So they were talking about this museum in the American Embassy and they eventually invited Iovleva to see it. And I could tell that, from how she described it, that we could do the same thing here in Russia, and that in general our work was just as good.

That’s what happened. We talked a lot about it... The people at the American Embassy looked at sculpture, twentieth-century collection, and said that they were impressed by the number of women sculptors, and how good they were. We did really have great artists. Lidiia Ivanovna became the head curator of this endeavor. And she, of course, did all this...

N.P.: Did it take a lot of time to organize? Maybe two years...

N.K.: Let’s see, we started in 1999, having discussions and so on, and then doing the work, and the exhibition didn’t open until 2002. And then in January 2002, when we had to write the book and were doing everything to get ready for the exhibition, suddenly—they were showing “Amazons of the Avant-Garde”⁶⁶ at the Tretyakov Gallery, and they also took exhibition materials from the Gallery’s collection, and it looked like they were doing it before us.

But we still...

NP: This is 2001?

NK: Yes. We still beat them though! Yes, our exhibition was after theirs, but we had materials starting from the fifteenth century, incredible collections. Some were brought

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pushkin_Museum, 3/20/20)

⁶⁵ According to Wikipedia “Wilhelmina Cole Holladay (born October 10, 1922 in Elmira, NY) is an American art collector and patron, and co-founder of the National Museum of Women in the Arts.” (Wikipedia Wilhelmina Holladay, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilhelmina_Holladay, 3/20/20)

⁶⁶ This exhibit displayed work from all female artists in order to celebrate the growing involvement of women in the Russian art world. According to the Guggenheim Museum this exhibition “traces the evolution of Modern Russian art from Neo-Primitivism, Cubo-Futurism, and Rayism to Suprematism and Constructivism.” (Guggenheim, <https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/amazons-of-the-avant-garde>, 3/18/20)

from the Hermitage⁶⁷, we gathered so many works... I had curated—and besides, the whole idea was ours!—the contemporary art division. And later it turned out that that exhibition of ours.... at some point I learned that that it was considered one of their best projects. I found out about this many years later. There were lines at the gallery. Later they apparently took it to different cities. Just without the contemporary portion, and without telling me anything. It was taken around Russia and shown in different museums, “Art is Feminine.” I later looked it up and saw.

NP: How much time passed before the next exhibition, which was organized in the renovated pedestal pavilion of The Worker and the Kolkhoz Woman⁶⁸⁶⁹ monument?

NK: The Worker and the Kolkhoz Woman – that was 2013.

NP: Ah, 2013. This is 2002 we’re talking about, so 12 years later.

NK: The second one was a very large exhibition, equally major, but it dealt with post-Soviet space. This was in the Women’s Museum, part of Vasili Tsereteli’s Museum of Modern Art^{70,71} – And what I’m telling you about is what we were doing.

NP: And what was this project called?

NK: “Zen: Gender...⁷²” “Zen” plus a colon. “Zhen” is a transcribed root⁷³ that we had in our very first exhibition, which was ZEN. We wrote “Woman as an Object” using it: “ZEN⁷⁴shchina kak ob”ekt.” I brought this title back. “Zen: Gender History in Post-Soviet Space.” “Gender Art History...” **NK’s phone rings.**

So. Should I talk...?

⁶⁷ The Hermitage is the second largest art museum in the world. It’s located in St. Petersburg and was founded after Catherine the Great acquired a huge collection of art. (Wikipedia Hermitage Museum, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermitage_Museum, 3/16/20)

⁶⁸ A statue of a man holding a hammer and a woman with a scythe that originally sat on top of the Soviet pavilion for the World’s Fair. (Wikipedia The Worker and the Kolkhoz Woman, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Worker_and_Kolkhoz_Woman, 3/20/20)

⁶⁹ The Russian term for a collective farm. (“Kolkhoz.” Encyclopædia Britannica. February 11, 2017)

⁷⁰ Vasili Tsereteli is a Russian Artist who holds high level leadership positions at both the Moscow Museum of Modern Art and the Russian Academy of Arts. He does not own the Museum of Modern Art. (Wikipedia Vasil Tsereteli, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vasili_Tsereteli, 3/18/20)

⁷¹ Vasili Zurabovich Tsereteli (b. 1978) is a Russian artist and currently the acting direction of the Moscow Museum of Contemporary Art. He is the son of Zurab Konstantinovich Tsereteli (b. 1934), a sculptor and academic and current President of the Russian Academy of Arts.

⁷² “Zhen” (“Жен” in Russian) is the root of the word “woman” in Russian.

⁷³ She’s talking about how in the name of the exhibit they changed the initial word “ZEN” is a way of rendering (transcribing) in Latin letters the Cyrillic ЖЕН. *Zen* (or, more accurately, *zhen*) is the **root** of the Russian word for “woman” (*zhena*). (Brendan Niebuurt, University of Michigan Libraries, 4/6/20)

⁷⁴ They used the transcribed Latin letters as the word for “Woman” in the exhibition title, so it was half Latin, half Cyrillic.

NP: Yes, go ahead.

NK: "... in Post-Soviet Space." And this "gender...", yes, "gender art history in post-Soviet space." And it was a very major exhibition because we gathered works from all the cities that could have had any, from the 1989–2009 time period. It was in two languages (the Tretyakov Gallery one was bilingual as well).

N.P.: Who curated it? Sarkisian?

N.K.: Oksana Sarkisian⁷⁵ and myself. It was my idea, after all. Just, for Oksana... Well, in what sense was it mine? I just went to Vasilii Tsereteli to propose the exhibition. They asked me who else was going to curate. But there was nothing that said there had to be another curator. I guess maybe they meant there had to be someone from the museum as well. And then Oksana Sarkisian walked in... **[inaudible]**. And I said, "well, she and I seem to have a pretty good relationship." Exhibitions, such major projects, tend to ruin relationships and breed arguments between the curators – but I'm getting ahead of myself here.

So in 2013 we went to Loshak – but this was by chance.⁷⁶ We had a lot of different project ideas, we worked on a lot of things: Biennales⁷⁷. Old age was a topic. First we did a project about old age. We also did one called "The Mirror" – based around the theme of a mirror, the gaze/mirror topic is a female one... We did major international projects, with more elite names... There was one called "Female Nano,"⁷⁸ at Rusnano⁷⁹, among others. We organized a lot in the Museum Center of the Russian State University for the Humanities.

N.P.: Who came to see these exhibitions? What kind of audience was it?

N.K.: We invited people. Students.

N.P.: It makes sense for the Russian State University for the Humanities and the Tretyakov Gallery, but what about the smaller exhibitions?

N.K.: We didn't really have any smaller ones. The smallest versions we had were actually at the RSUH. Sometimes the exhibitions were on the second floor, but they have an entrance system where you need a pass to enter—the access is limited—but it's still a Museum Center. In fact, the Museum Center of the RSUH is probably the only museum that is within a university in Russia (now, it turns out, there is also a university museum in Petersburg). If you look at the West, especially America, you'll see that university museums are very prestigious there. Here they're not funded at all, they get no money, and I think the

⁷⁵ An artist, curator, and critic who is best known for her work on an exhibit titled "Her". (Gluklya, <http://gluklya.com/articles/her/>, 3/16/20)

⁷⁶ Marina Devovna Loshak was the Director of the Pushkin Museum at that time. She had replaced Lidiia Ivanonva Iovleva.

⁷⁷ An event that happens every two years. Often used to describe international contemporary art exhibits. (Wikipedia Biennale, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biennale>, 3/13/20)

⁷⁸ An international exhibit shown in 2011 for the 4th Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art (TCXP, <http://old.tcxp.ru/Default.aspx?id=207>, 3/6/20)

⁷⁹ A Russian development institute whose goal is to promote hi-tech industry in Russia. (Rusnano, <http://en.rusnano.com>, 3/6/20)

Museum Center is falling apart together with the RSUH. We recently had some collaborative projects there with Korean artists, but they were generally international projects. We actually did a lot of international projects. We had international projects that dealt with the so-called mental archaeology⁸⁰, many different things. So we did a lot. There were large retrospectives, widescreen – this is art. Well, maybe that was the first one because then we had “Art of the Feminine Gender,” “Gender History of Art in the Post-Soviet Space.” These created a history of Russian women’s art; and, of course, also there was that exhibition in the pavilion of The Worker and the Kolkhoz Woman, March 8, 2013. They really were magnificent exhibitions.

NP: In 2013.

NK: In 2013. Little shits! They, of course, ruined everything... But you can’t diminish the fact that it really was great. And Loshak is a professional of the highest class. She brought in collectors to the avant-garde portion, she did a brilliant job. There were stunning works there. And these feminists gave us such great artists, who... you’d have a hard time getting them for huge amounts of money because they are so well known. But they too sent...

NP: What kind of funding did you get?

NK: No funding, we didn’t get anything! Every time, we got nothing – that’s what I mean, going back to that topic. That’s where the question of funding arose, actually. Even the curators didn’t get paid, nothing at all. We were promised some money by Irida, but in the end they didn’t give anything.⁸¹ Though they didn’t promise it to us, but rather to the venue so that they would use their logos, but in the end they didn’t pay anything. There was a very rigorous selection of Western artists. They sent us... well, VALIE EXPORT,⁸² the Guerrilla Girls⁸³ sent some of theirs, ORLAN⁸⁴ was there, and, of course, the best of our own artists.

N.P.: Do you currently have any relationships with international women’s organizations? Ones that support art projects by women artists, for instance?

⁸⁰ This is also called Cognitive Archeology. This field tries to infer the ideologies of ancient societies through the analysis of material remains. (Wikipedia Cognitive Archeology, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_archaeology, 3/20/20)

⁸¹ Irida, meaning “Iris,” is a foundation for the support and development of the education system in Russia.

⁸² VALIE EXPORT, born Waltraud Lehner, is an Austrian artist known for her body performances and video installations. See Hans-Michael Bock, ed., *The Concise Cinegraph: Encyclopedia of German Cinema* (New York: Berghan Books, 2009), 114–15.

⁸³ The Guerrilla Girls is an anonymous group of female feminist artists formed in 1985. Members of the group wear gorilla masks to keep their anonymity as they work to expose various different types of inequality through posters and public demonstrations. See “Guerrilla Girls,” Tate, accessed May 11, 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/guerrilla-girls-6858>.

⁸⁴ ORLAN, previously known as Mireille Suzanne Francette Porte, is a French performance artist and feminist icon. She is known for undergoing plastic surgery to become a living work of art and having implants placed in her forehead to mimic the “Mona Lisa’s” raised brow and chin modifications to resemble Botticelli’s “Venus.” She has been very outspoken about technology, art, and feminisms. (Frank, Priscilla. “ORLAN Talks Plastic Surgery, Beauty Standards And Giving Her Fat To Madonna.” *The Huffington Post*. January 29, 2013. Accessed February 15, 2018. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/29/performance-artist-orlan-interview-beauty-surgery_n_2526077.html.)

N.K.: Do they exist? First, we all know that in reality, female artists and art projects weren't especially supported here even in the earlier times when everyone was getting funded. And as soon as there appeared a way for someone to support someone, someone else always appeared who was ready to do something for money. Second, here, in Russia, they still don't like... this history. So the only project I'm working on now... but I won't even talk about it because I have to do it, it's important to me. It will probably be my last project that has to do with women and their art.

N.P.: What topic will you take up if you leave this one?

N.K.: My own. I would like to finally take up my creative work, my pieces, and only maybe keep some paid projects or maybe some...

N.P.: I don't think the topic of women will let you go that easily... Do you currently have any contact with artists? Not art historians but feminist artists?

N.K.: My contacts are mostly with artists. You can't do anything without artists. Art historians don't really play any part here. Artists, yes, I have a lot of contacts, both here and abroad.

N.P.: Are there differences in the way that feminist art and women's art exist in our country and in other countries, say, the United States? And if so, what are these differences?

N.K.: Feminist artists and good female artists—they don't always call themselves feminist—but they invariably touch upon these themes... They are paid very well, their fees are very high. They won't come here. Take ORLAN, the materials she sent us on a USB or allowed us to use on the condition that we print things and do everything else according to her description and then destroy all the pieces in the presence of witnesses. There is a practice like that, you are sent what in that moment becomes an original, but the original, we hadn't bought it, hadn't paid for it, so it wasn't supposed to exist outside of the walls of the current exhibition, so we had to destroy everything in the presence of witnesses. It was a shame, we had to destroy all those works. I really wanted to organize a conference and... at least keep some fragments, keep going, to tell a wider circle of people about them. And the artists really wanted to come, ORLAN did, but she required that we pay for transportation and accommodation, of course, and a 700 euro honorarium. And that's not even a high fee. We got the French Embassy to agree to pay for the trip and host her in their hotel, but we couldn't manage to agree on the honorarium. And then she also demanded that we organize a banquet and invite all the artists; she said she wanted to meet them too. And that required a lot of money as well.

Loshak was a sort of curator then. She was appointed Director of the Pushkin Museum and with we kind of sto-.... And I managed to reserve \$3,000—it was a lot of work—at the embassy, from the cultural attaché⁸⁵, for Mary Kelly, to have her come.⁸⁶ But Mary Kelly said: “we don't know how to get these visas of yours, the visas are expensive, and I won't go

⁸⁵ An embassy official whose role is to create cultural connections between the home and foreign countries. (Lexico Dictionary, <https://www.lexico.com>, 3/13/20)

⁸⁶ Mary Kelly is a conceptual artist and professor at UCLA.

without my husband.” But paying for her husband... Though, to be fair, she really did have some health problems, and she really only traveled with her husband. But, you know, she was such a high-profile person, and such an artist, and so on, we had to offer some support, but we didn’t have the resources. And that was the end of it, though of course it would’ve been great, wonderful, if they had come. It would have been so...

N.P.: So the main difference between us, our scholars of women’s art, and those who are, let’s say, in Sweden or America is that there it is funded and here it isn’t?

N.K.: It is funded there. They pay honorariums. It’s unheard of there that a curator such as me could work for pennies or even without pay. But here, contemporary art in general is crumbling. They closed the National Centre for Contemporary Arts.

N.P.: Do any ordinary women attend these exhibitions? Is it possible to reach women through this women’s art?

N.K.: Actually, to reach... The problem isn’t to reach women, but to give art its proper place in this history. And we have to reach everyone, not just women. To tell the truth, women are hated here. This is a country where women are simply hated, especially those women who accomplish something. So, of course, we had lines out the door, a lot of people came, and we got such negative responses, things like: you, women, should’ve just stayed home, should’ve stayed there...” I saw something like that in the media or on the Internet maybe, I read an irate article about how some women went to a bar and beat up some men who were harassing them or something – whatever the reason, there was a fight. And it had more or less the same phrases: “you, women, should just stay at home.” The bad thing wasn’t the bar fight, but that it was specifically women who got physical; instead of being off somewhere doing their womanly things, they went and got into a fight. And it was more or less the same content in the responses to the exhibition—the stress was on the fact that the artists were women. Even an acquaintance of mine from Portugal—he is a doctoral student who wrote a dissertation about this—he asked for guest book with all these negative comments, and it went into his dissertation. It’ll now be included in my work as well, actually, I also intend to use it. I even asked him to send me all his photos and the comments he received. He, too, heard these same kind of negative responses...

NP: And what’s the topic of his dissertation? Approximately.

NK: I can’t remember. I have it written down somewhere. He sent me a letter. A lot of time has passed, and I didn’t remember... I forgot to call him.

NP: Is it about women’s art?

NK: Well, it had to do with the problem of representation in women’s art. All this provokes a lot of interest. People come and look... But still a lot of nega-... but I can’t say that... but many say the opposite too: “hey, look, this is great that...”

NP: Is there any sense in women artists uniting in order to defend their rights collectively, as well as the right to exhibit, and to get some funding for the exhibitions?

NK: No, there's no sense in that. Well, maybe Irida managed to unite some people. But they're all talentless... Experience shows that real artists can't be united. So they can be united, but is it worth it? But it would be great to have a museum of women's art here. It's telling that these museums are opening all around the world, everywhere that such projects materialize. That would be something that would unite because the best thing is to give an opportunity for interesting ideas to be realized. And I noticed that a women's project, one that is specifically a women's project, works differently. Even if you take the same work and show it in a different context, it will become different in that other context. In a way, it speaks of completely different things. It has its own secret texts, which... Well, this is a vast field for research. And it is yet another level that appears within culture. That's always great! We talk a little about this in terms of religious themes before, i.e. that God gave culture so that it could develop and advance, that is, the people accepted God's gift such that could perfect themselves. That's why I think as a culture becomes richer and reaches a higher level, the level of the people will also rise. We, by the way, deal with gender themes, meaning not only women's but also men's topics. But in general...

NP: I have a question about where it is possible to mark or suppose some points of intersection between the exhibitions of women's art and the interest in women's creative work and the women's movement in our country? Does it even exist here, a women's movement? What was and is the relationship between it and creative women, women artists? Is there a relationship?

NK: At different stages some kind of a women's movement tried to interact in some ways with women artists, but I noticed that because the women's movement primarily consists of people who don't know much about art, they begin to work with groups, they begin playing political games in order to open salons, give pictures as gifts, and then they are given grants. And they have artists who also want to go *en plein air*, paint, and that's all.

NP: Because there is this nonconformist direction in art, and it by definition cannot be support by the government.

NK: Well, no, if they hadn't, for instance, gotten rid of the NCCA...

NP: What is the NCCA?

NK: It's the National Center for Contemporary Art⁸⁷. I'd suggested that they give us some space at the Moscow Museum of Contemporary Art, then something on Petrovka [street], in a few different places, to make some sort of a department, maybe even just for women's art, that's common in museums. They didn't object, but this would require a budget. It would require a venue, and that brings its own set of complications. Of course, we do need such structure. Especially in Russia, where it's all patriarchal. Where they don't really like women. They only like those women who behave like they are supposed to. So it's all old here. If they would also build... There is again a big monopoly here when it comes to contemporary art.. Well, there are still some projects happening, but it's not quite right, it's not consistent, regular work. So we couldn't manage to create a museum for women's art,

⁸⁷ This is a museum center for art, research, and exhibitions in Moscow, Russia. (Wikipedia National Centre for Contemporary Arts, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Centre_for_Contemporary_Arts, 3/20/20)

for which we've already collected an archive, and there would really be something... something to discuss.

We never got any money for it, even though, for instance, the Washington Museum of Women in the Arts told us: "if you manage to create a museum, we'll find something, we'll give you something for collaborative projects and so on—some common interests would appear in terms of financing." I think we would've found ways, but it looks we're not going to follow a Western path in general. But we are participating in projects in Asia (I'm actually going to co-organize a women's art festival in South Korea). There are a lot of projects in Asia—women's projects, feminist projects—in which we participate. So it's something that exists around the world.

N.P: Maybe the project will end up being successful after all? Maybe this whole idea of creating a museum for women's art will revive during the collaboration not with Western organizations but with Eastern ones, with their understanding of the topic of women in creative work and in art?

N.K.: Well, actually, the leading Eastern or Asian ones are fully collaborating with American and other institutions, they are more interesting to them than we are. I'm not even sure China's very interested in us, but the projects could be interesting, especially now. But I don't know how it is. There is no money in any case, so there's no point in talking about it.

N.P: Well, we'll hope for the best. I don't want to end the interview on a sad note. I can only hope that the ideas materialize, that we might get a museum of women's art in our country, that the number of women artists—with different voices—will grow, as well as the number of art historians who will be able to explain things if the artist herself could not articulate something, who will be explain that this message is directed toward all of us, all women who can appreciate this topic. Thank you very much Natal'ia, for today's conversation.