

architecture / fashion / design

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All Kinds of Action on the Eastern Front

The Fashion and Music Scene in Russia

“We eat ice-cream when its 30°C below outside and drink vodka when it is 30°C above. Are there any people on the planet more exuberant and stronger than the Russians? Come visit us and see for yourself: Welcome to Moscow!” (Petlura)

Interested in finding out about the fever gripping 10 million voracious Muscovites, about the trash culture cultivated there, and about fashion in the Soviet Union, and today’s Russia? Then stop by fashion anarchist Petlura’s unorthodox cellar abode on the premises of an Orthodox monastery in downtown Moscow. The garment king of the underground reigns supreme here, alongside his muse, 80 year-old Miss Alternative World (London, 1988), the divine Bronia, amidst some 45,000 garments and objects. He stopped counting them long ago, he admits, these treasures of everyday culture and fashion in Russia he has been collecting for over twenty years in raids on Moscow’s flea markets and by rummaging in trash dumpsters.

Behind a collection of crutches once used by long-dead Red Army veterans, there are kilos of colorful garments with flower-, rocket- or tractor-patterns from the Stalin to Brezhnev eras stacked up in perforated plastic sacks. The garment racks are crammed with brown school uniforms decorated with their typically exchangeable white collars. The entire Soviet Union attended school wearing these uniforms until the early 1990s. Hanging behind a stuffed horse - retrieved from the props department of the Bolshoi Theater - is Petlura’s prize piece: the space suit of a MIR cosmonaut. Next to it is an outfit for a kolkhoz worker, made for eternity and for the fulfillment of the Five Year Plan. Right beside it is an invaluable one-of-a-kind specimen from recent Russian fashion history: an imitation jeans jacket, presumably the pride and joy of the young Russian who once owned it. This status symbol’s former holder covered it with sewn-on labels in a Western manner: a badge from the 26th Party Congress of the Soviet Union shines forth next to sports badges from the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. A touching memento to an era when capitalism was already knocking at the door.

Back in the mid-1980s, years before the advent of capitalism, the Ukrainian Petlura (born in 1955) was staging hot rock festivals, bizarre art and fashion performances in Moscow, and was creating his own fashion collections by utilizing flea market garments. In 1989 he founded the alternative Free Academy of Moscow, an artist commune that squatted for five years in the capital’s house of culture as the center of the independent art scene.

These kids have never seen the old idiots“Most of the kids growing up in Moscow nowadays have never seen the old idiots who were standing on the mausoleum greeting the happy throngs of the damned with flabby gestures,” Russian satirist Yevgeni Popov notes happily. Mama Moscow is enjoying a second youth. While the art scene has come to a virtual standstill, the applied arts are gaining steam. A new club opens its doors every few weeks. Free fashion studios, labels, and design offices are popping up all over. “In the West, they still think we produce only folkloristic kitsch or

bad copies of western designers," the fashion journalist Svetlana Komissarova complains: "There are a good dozen designers in Russia today who have immense international style, even though this year is the first time many take the plunge to Paris. When you keep in mind what modest resources these designers have," Komissarova goes on, "and them working in a country with virtually no processing industry, let alone a network, you really have to admire their fervor."

Warm pants are warm "Warm pants keep you warm, macaroni nourishes, and anti-aircraft guns shoot!" This, or something along these lines, was the sober maxim for design in the Soviet Union where Moscow fashion designer and artist Lena Kvadrat (born in 1966) grew up. In the meantime, the successful young designer has written her own chapter of fashion history. Kvadrat has a prospering boutique in Moscow and in 2002 expanded her company to Austria, where she has a shop on Westbahnstrasse in Vienna's 7th district. This will be followed in mid-2004 by an outlet in Berlin. Her textile artworks are sold in numerous Austrian, German, and Swiss boutiques as well as in museum shops like the MAK in Vienna or the Guggenheim in Berlin.

Her art point label has made Lena Kvadrat one of the best known stars in the Moscow and Vienna fashion scenes, not least thanks to her hot conceptual presentations involving actors, amateur models, and electronic DJs that are a fun mix of theater, fashion, and musical performances. The label began nearly ten years ago as the name for a group of artists. Back then Lena Kvadrat was printing mostly cheap accessories like silk scarves with urban pictograms featuring traffic and prohibitory signs. Initially they were intended more as Pop Art exhibition pieces than as fashion to be worn.

Noisy and post-industrial: Music from Russia is perfectly in tune with current trends like no other country, yet it is also trailing behind. But as everybody knows, upheavals are always a great benefit to the arts world, especially to music. While vendible "Pop-sauce" flows on MTV, the Russian kids are producing their own music at home, be it in Moscow, St. Petersburg, or even provincial Siberia, irrespective of politics, tradition, censorship, copyright, and the market. Some are producing music on computers so old that only one song fits on the hard drive, which they then transfer to a cassette. Then they have to delete all the data and start all over again. Cassettes are still the key media for the distribution of electronic music in Russia. Electronic music expert Andrej Gratchiov shares his insights: "They squeeze everything they possibly can out of their old heaps of scrap metal. Until the mid-1990s many crack musicians even programmed their own music programs. Paradoxically, many musicians are also using leading-edge software available at rock-bottom prices on the superbly organized black market here."

The 31-year-old Muscovite describes what the Russians are brewing up as "very loud and post-industrial," and then elaborates: "That's because there are so many factories in Siberia. Our cities are as gray as the faces of the people living in them. That is why our electronic music is so much more melodious than in the West. We want our sounds to be cool but definitely also to come across as relaxed and peaceful. You might say it's a reaction to the environment. There are always traces of melancholy in it." Russian electronic musician Richardas Norvila (born in 1961) couldn't agree more: "I hate the kind of electronic sound you can't understand unless you work through all the explanatory notes on the recording. To my mind, the music should go straight into your blood stream." He writes highly original electronic fairy tales like *Around the Campfire*, a story about the pioneer camps of his childhood. These works are dramaturgic tone poems that take the liberty of being ironic and trashy. Kitsch is another one of those terms the Russians are reluctantly starting to get a handle on after reflecting on their own culture.

Music market controlled by the mafia These electricians, though, cannot count on a functioning distribution system for their musical experiments; performance venues are also few and far

between. And the CD and record factories are operated by shady businessmen who wouldn't even consider turning their machinery back on for a pressing of less than 100,000, according to electronic music historian Andrej Gratchiov. The mafia is also in charge of marketing popular music. "Pirates control 95% of the distribution systems for MCs and CDs in the regions. In Moscow, about 60% are legal," explains Markus Tröscher, a consultant at Warner Brothers Russia. "In the remoter provinces, generally only the inlays are delivered to the producer. They produce the disks themselves right on the spot." Only MTV-Sound receives money and promotion - This is what the Russians call their sappy Russian Pop. "Anyone with a glut of money in Russia invests in the glitter and glamour business and buys himself a Pop star – that's the fashion nowadays," Tröscher says from experience. In the mid-1990s Techno, Drum 'n' Bass and Trance were very popular in even the most remote cities of Siberia. Then all at once in October 1998 everything changed. No, it wasn't the start of a recession, it was the month MTV went on the air in Russia, too. Andrej Gratchiov sighs: "Pop music may have cut the ground from under our feet, but we keep on standing our ground."