

SIKSI

the leader of the pack

Timur Novikov is the charismatic leading figure within the St. Petersburg art scene where he has generated, and continues to generate, new tendencies and interaction. In 1992, he founded the New Academy for the Fine Arts, celebrating the return of beauty.

By Olesya Turkina and Viktor Mazin

PRESENTED BY TIMUR Novikov and his comrade-in-arms Ivan Sotnikov in 1982 at an exhibition of non-official artists, *The Zero-Object*—a hole in an exhibition stand—is a very telling moment in the artist's biography. The Zero-Object was rejected by Leningrad nonconformist artists since it did not harmonize with local notions of the avant-garde work of art. But since it proved impossible to remove *The Zero-Object* without dismantling the entire exhibition stand, the organizing committee posted a written appeal asking viewers not to interpret the hole as a work of art. In their turn, the official mass-media used *The Zero-Object* affair to demonstrate to what absurdities the avant-garde artists had sunk. The scandal brought with it fame. Timur Novikov immediately opposed himself to the two camps of artists into which the art scene of that time was divided—the social realists and the nonconformists—and became known as the leading avant-garde artist.

Proclaiming the advent of a new generation free from the ideological dogmas of past years, the "New Artists" united around Timur Novikov and the Zero-Object. This group's artistic strategic was distinguished by inventiveness, the support of friends, a striving to provoke the masses to create and the carrying out of a hidden social demand according to the principle: "If you need an artist, become one yourself."

The work of Vladimir Mayakovsky—who in

the teens of this century was literally designated a poet by his futurist friends—became the prototype for this sort of behavior. The artist Mikhail Larionov (founder of the "rayonist" movement), whose theory of "everythingness"



Oleg Maslov & Viktor Kuznetsov, *Youth of the Emperor*, oil on canvas, 1995.

confirmed the possibility for the artist of producing everything from everything; the artist Maria Siniakova-Urechina (friend of Velimir Khlebnikov) who by inheritance conferred the title

"Chairman of the Earth" on Novikov's friend Sergei Bugaev Afrika; and, of course, Vladimir

Mayakovsky were proclaimed by Novikov the heroes of the "New Artists." In 1986 the "Club of the Friends of Mayakovsky," which was headed by Novikov along with Afrika, was organized. The artists propagandized Mayakovsky—who influenced the masses and, moreover, consciously, manipulated his audience with collective ideological notions—as the first pop-star of the 20th century.

Consistently cultivating the cult of pop-stars, Timur Novikov formulated his own peculiar pantheon. Aside from Vladimir Mayakovsky, Andy Warhol (who not long before his death sent Novikov and Afrika autographed cans of Campbell's tomato soup) also found himself in this hallowed group. Later, during the period of neoacademism, the artists Aleksandr Deineka, Aleksandr Samokhvalov and Arno Breker would enter into this pantheon.

Any association presupposes the presence of a certain cult. Having revealed the connection between culture and cult in the 80s, Timur Novikov actively developed this connection in the early 90s, when a shift in orientation from the Russian and Soviet avant-gardes to Greco-Roman art took place, a shift that only at first

glance seems unexpected. The new movement was dubbed "neoacademism" by Novikov and originally united—aside from its "father"—several of his friends: Georgy Gurjanov, Denis Egelskii, Andrei Medvedev and, somewhat later, Oleg Maslov and Viktor Kuznetsov. Novikov, also underwent a "neoacademic" shift: In

the center of the picture appeared what Novikov defines as “the beautiful image”: Oscar Wilde, Apollo, Narcissus, Hyacinth...

Thus—and this change shows this—Timur Novikov is, first and foremost, the ideologist of the movement. Specially written by Timur Novikov for the scholarly-research journal *Kabinet*, the drama *Secret Cult* became neoacademism’s first manifesto. In this work, a stylization of Wilde’s critical writings, the allegation (which Novikov would repeat for the next five years) that there exists a conspiracy against beauty, a conspiracy organized by modernists in the 20th century, sounded for the first time: “The cities are being captured by modernists of all stripes. In the academies the statues are being smashed, their debris tossed out and profaned. The black square as the symbol of Apollo’s terrifying dream... the entire history of the last century, it is all a history of conflict, war, in it there are no peaceful times.”

The tactic of employing binary oppositions allowed Novikov to very quickly create the most accessible (for mass consciousness) symbolic packaging of the contemporary art situation. Moreover, this kind of artistic strategy

Saviour in Moscow. Thus in this situation an appeal to the idea of the classical legacy turns out to be maximally appropriate and valorized. Also, the neoclassical idea was fated to appear in a city in which the classical legacy of the end of the 18th—beginning of the 19th centuries—the age of Russian classicism—is continually discussed.

Apparently not without reason Timur Novikov speaks these days of the impending advent of a new Russian classicism, wittily combining the esthetic term “classicism” with the popular attribute applied to the Soviet nouveau riche—“new Russian.” Thus a unique adaptation of art to the new state ideology is taking place; moreover, this process is declared in terms of a struggle with the much stronger Western modernism, which even in the given territory has achieved a complete victory: “...in the 20th century in Europe a movement against the classical legacy arises and near the end of the century all art scholars will announce the total victory over antiquity in Europe [axiom 3].”

In the course of several years neoacademism has not only established itself in mass consciousness as the main Petersburg art move-

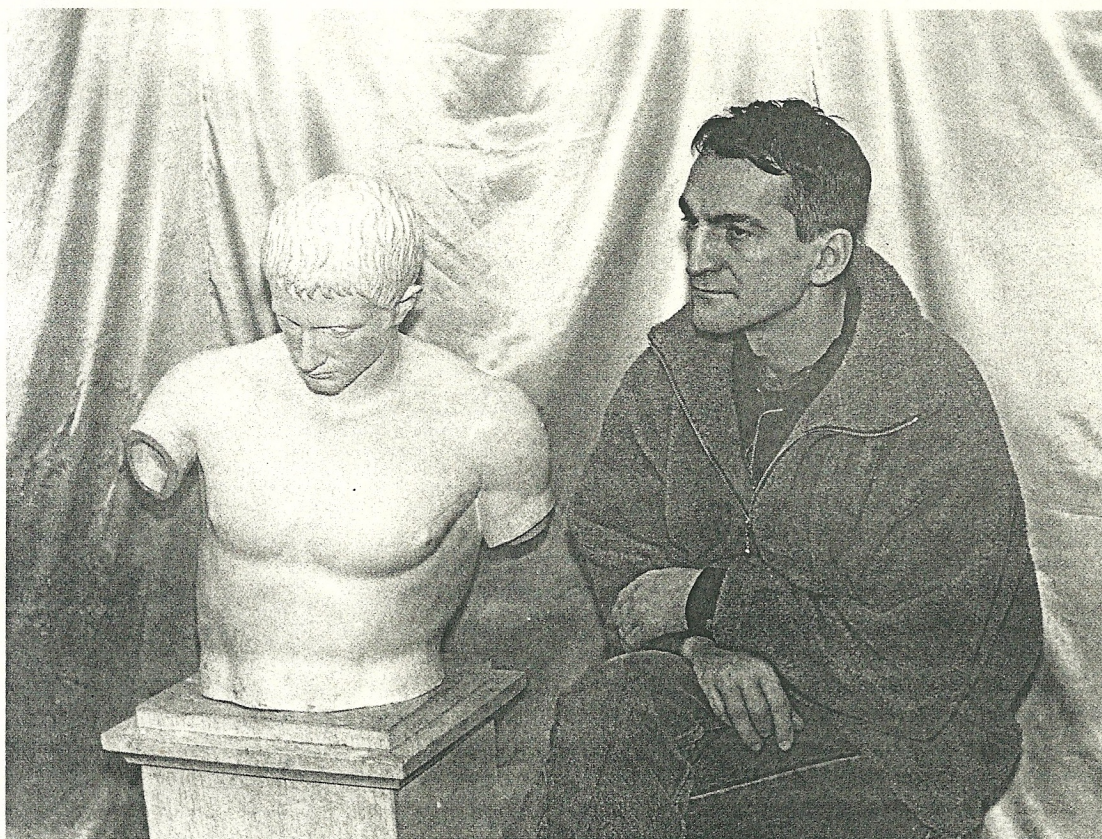
Novikov in 1992 in the famous artists’ squat on Pushkinskaya 10.

The artists who work in the New Academy are united not by a single style, but by an ideology; not by a concrete technique, but by the esthetic of a certain “beautiful image.” Demonstrating the nature of kitsch in the historical form popular in the salon paintings of the 19th century, Oleg Maslov and Viktor Kuznetsov produce oil paintings from photographs, presenting themselves and their friends in the images of Roman patricians. Egor Ostrov creates series of antiqued images on a computer or uses oil paints to imitate computer technology. Olga Tobreluts produces computer collages in the spirit of salon painting. In his paintings and drawings Denis Egelskii is oriented towards Renaissance images; Georgi Gurjanov—towards those models of social realist art which traditionally sang the praises of the beauty of the human body: for example, Aleksandr Samokhvalov’s sports paintings.

These artists’ message—beauty—is capable of being transformed in accordance with the wishes of both the image’s producer and its interpreter. It is truly the case that the power of this message is so great that it begets the fear of the possibility of the notion “beauty” being used to manipulate, a fear connected with the message of past totalitarian regimes. And this is why the foreign mass media react as they do to Novikov’s New Academy. (It suffices to cite the heading and sub-heading of an article in *The Guardian*, dated 17 February 1996: “Beauty up there in red lights. Far from joining western movements, post communist Russian artists are looking to a Stalinist-fascist aesthetic.”)

Thanks to the mass media the birth of a phenomenon is taking place. Thus in the end it is not so important how many professors or students the Academy has, what its real status is, what the works of neoacademics look like. What is important is that this phenomenon is created where it’s discussed. □

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Timur Novikov in the New Academy, St. Petersburg, 1994.

coincided in time with a turn towards extreme conservatism, which was manifested on all levels, first and foremost on the level of state ideology, oriented to a great degree towards the imperial esthetic model of the 19th century. This was reflected, in particular, in the grandiose project for rebuilding the Church of Christ the

ment (despite the fact that in Petersburg hundreds of contemporary artists work, among them such well-known artists as Sergei Bugaev Afrika, Vladimir Kustov and Evgeny Yufit, artists having no relation to this trend) but has been legitimated by the *New Academy for the Fine Arts*, opened by Timur