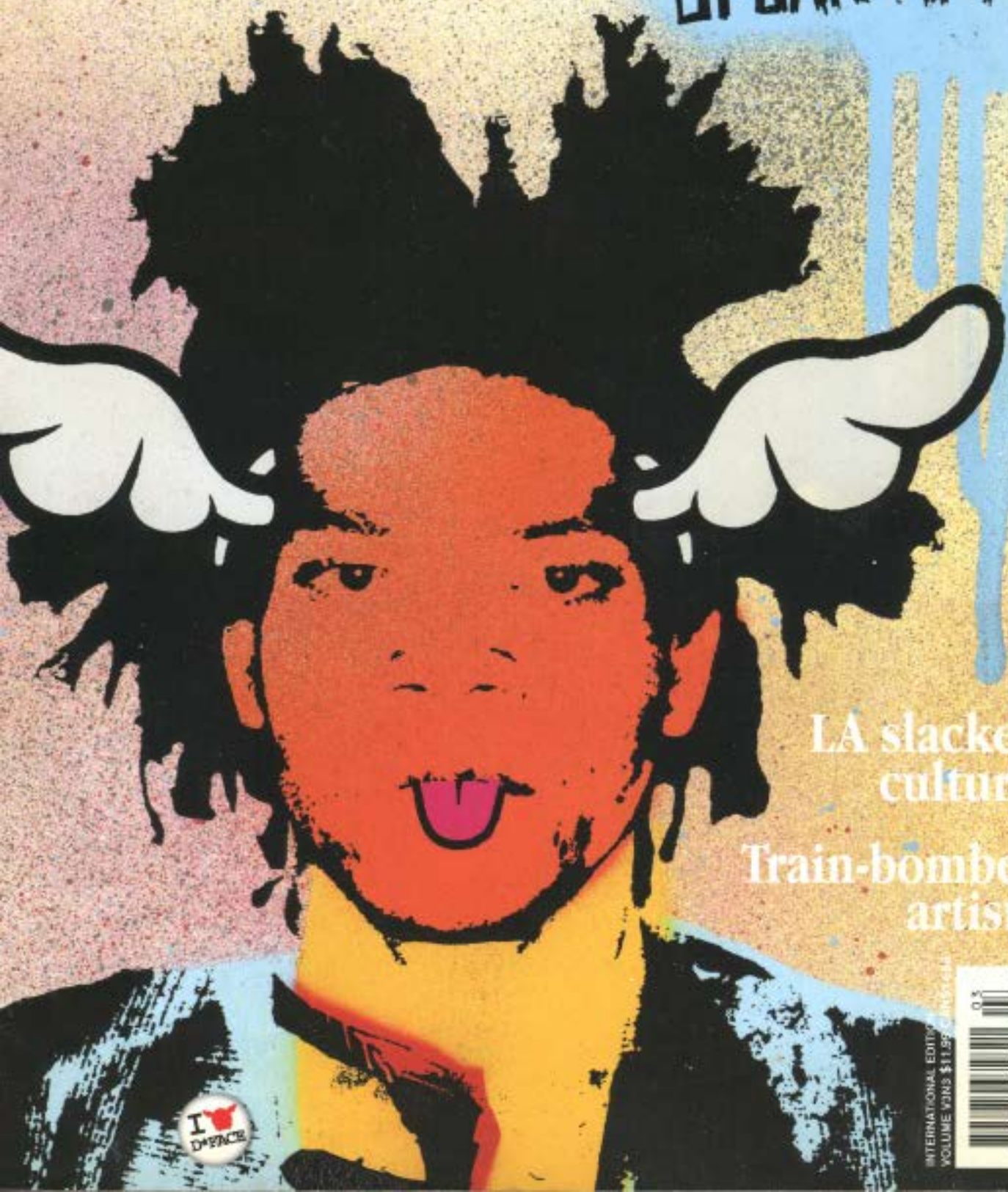


# ArtReview

INTERNATIONAL ART & STYLE

URBAN ART



LA slacker  
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Train-bomber  
artists



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# ArtReview

## March

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**Left:** Melik Ohanian, *Slowmotion*, from *Slave to Value*, 2003, 150 electrical circuits, on/off switchboard **Right:** Irina Kowalska, *Postcards from Warsaw*, 2002-04, photograph **Below:** Alexander Pogorzelski, *Waltz-Resort*, 2003, oil on canvas, 50 x 70cm



It was good work by the four-man group Blue Noses, Blue Soup (no relation) and Alexander Brodsky. For Guelman, that's the point: to allow 'international curators to see Russian artists'; and it may also introduce contemporary art to many Russians 'who still want it to be realistic'. According to Guelman, strides have been made over the past 15 years. Russian art has changed significantly, from only two groups at the end of the 1980s – Moscow Conceptualists (such as Kabakov) and Soviet realists – to an overly Russian climate in the mid-1990s (encouraged by foreign collectors), to a contemporary scene in which 'artists represent a kind of freedom: freedom to speak what you think, freedom not to love president'. That may sound romantic, but Guelman maintains that Russian art should be judged alongside its global counterparts.

Artists are fighting some very local battles nonetheless. On his way to the gallery,

someone called Guelman on his mobile for an update on complaints from the Orthodox Church about two pieces in the show. One offender, by Marina Koldobskaya, featured a red, plastic cut-out of Christ's head hung in front of a television that played a loop of commercials. 'It used to be through the face of god that you found paradise,' explicates Guelman, 'but now it is through advertising.' For decadent westerners (my hand's up), the point is so banal it smacks of the days when TV was a novelty and churchgoing an obligation. And yet Moscow is hardly a backwater: its snow-piled streets are lined with designer shops, SUVs and billionaires. Surely, if Guelman is right and Russian art deserves to be judged internationally, we ought to expect more than a moralising one-liner, even if it does perturb the Orthodox bigwigs.

In fact, a lot of Russian work gave off a sanctimonious pong; curators, too, defended art by its ethical content. Elena Zaitseva and Julia Aksanova, responsible for 'No Comment?', decided to make an exhibition of young artists because they are very sensitive to social problems', immediately invoking Philip Donstov's *C17H20O4* (2004) to illustrate their point. The installation featured three figures wrapped in red, white and blue cloth (aka the Russian flag), aglow from an internal light source. The title is the chemical formula of cocaine, and Zaitseva was keen to point out that Donstov wished to comment on the new Russian obsession with wealth and pleasure. Since when do artists warn alert society to the pitfalls of drugs rather than take them?

Yet sometimes a little smugness could be sharp and witty. Nicolai Olegnikov's video *Showcase* (2005) portrayed a soprano in a

mail singing brand names as if she were belting out an aria. Although the point, that Russians have replaced high culture with high prices, was obvious, the collision was funny.

If 'No Comment?' was a good show with a shaky theme, 'Post-Diaspora' offered a stronger premise and some excellent work. Curator Olga Kolperkina, based in the US for the past six years, was interested in how 'many eastern Europeans are assimilated and live everywhere, but nobody ever reflects on it'. Polish-born artist Joanna Malinowska put an ad in the *New York Review of Books* that read: 'Responsible, reliable woman who's passionate about domestic chores is available for cleaning and other household duties in exchange for lecture in any academic field (especially philosophy)'. The resulting series of videos shows the artist cleaning and ironing, overlaid with a soundtrack of academics lecturing about – to take one example – how the existence of the howler monkey is no proof of providence. Malinowska played with the stereotype of the eastern European cleaner, but also showed up the social desolation of her lecturers. Likewise, the video *Earon's HW* (2004), by Netherlands-based Moldovan Pavel Braila, documents the desperation evinced by the flimsy, faux-opulent houses built by the Romany of his native country. The Bach soundtrack, all mid-European confidence and serenity, brought out the heart-rending fruitlessness of their aspirations.

Despite its unruly size, the high pain-in-the-arse factor posed by Moscow (I was hassled by both cops and crooks) and some banal curating, the overall atmosphere at the Biennale was upbeat. So let's hope there's another: fl come again, if they grant me a visa.

# Sleeping giant

Moscow's first biennial has its flaws, but at least **Craig Burnett** got to see some underexposed Russian art

Russia is often portrayed as a culture held together by dialectical tensions: aristocrat and serf, Asia and Europe, beauty and suffering. So as the inaugural Moscow Biennale – subtitled 'Dialectics of Hope' – opened at the former Lenin Museum, it seemed fitting that the State Duma approved a bill that will permit the government to refuse an entry visa to anyone who is disrespectful towards the country. Sure, let's invite artists from all over the world to discuss the future, but don't mention Putin's thuggish policies or Russia's cowboy capitalism: we might not invite you back. Well, no disrespect, but that's no way to start a dialogue or to instil hope that there will be a Biennale in 2007. If there is another, let me suggest one thing: mid-winter is no time to host an international art bash in Moscow.

Yet few foreign artists will miss the icy spindrifts of Red Square. The Biennale is not for them, but for the Muscovites, for whom it offers a taster of what's going on out there in the art world. Curators Joseph Backstein, Nicolas Bourriaud, Daniel Bimbaum, Hans Ulrich-Obrist and Rosa Martinez served up a familiar group including Santiago Sierra, Pawel Althamer, Jeremy Deller, John Bock, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, Yang Fudong and Tino Seghal, as well as a clutch of lesser-known Russians. In this light, Argentine artist Tomas Saraceno's *Un Mundo*, a beach-ball globe hovering in a jet of air with a tiny digital camera taped to its surface that projected everything it saw onto a nearby wall, seemed to portray the Biennale as an unblinking Cyclops importuning Moscow to catch up, and catch up fast, with the rest of the world.

So for the rest of us – collectors, curators, disrespectful journalists – the Biennale might offer a useful snapshot of contemporary Russian art. That it did, mostly through a bunch of satellite shows around the city. 'Russia 2', curated by Moscow gallerist Marat Gelman, was a group show at the House of Artists, a maze of commercial gallery spaces in the vast, hangar-like building that also houses the New Tretyakov Gallery of Russian Art. Among established names such as Oleg Kulik and Dubosarsky and Vinogradov, there



**This page:** Oleg Kulik, *Moskova and chisten*, 2004, triptych, colour and black-and-white photograph, 240 x 300cm and 220 x 210cm, desk