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**“Liquid
Museum:
A netu tetia takogo muzeia
[Lady, there is no such
museum]”**

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Liquid Museum:

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[Lady, there is no such museum]***

Abstract

In recent years I have started making theoretico-mediatic installations, which try to create synergism between theoretical thought and mediatic performance, a new kind of theoretical and social space, or sphere, if you wish, which is responsive to the extreme mobility of new technologies that constitute this space. They constitute it, while at the same time un-working it in ways that have been dormant throughout the history of culture, but are now reaching new levels of speed and expediency. My two recent films, parts of which are related to museums, are of particular interest to this essay-film-installation: the first, *Cinemuse: Selfie With Sokurov*, with Aleksander Sokurov, the second, *v Pitere–pet’* (In Peter—a song, English title: *Windows to Europe. Sergey Shnurov*) (the opening was at the *Poslanie k cheloveku* [Message to man] film festival in St Petersburg in September 2017), with Sergei Shnurov. You have no doubt recognized him in the second, Russian part of my title also featuring a museum. The inextricable collusion between preservation in the museum, technologies of archivization, and ideology, permeating the museum qua public

sphere, will be analyzed in light of my two films and on the examples from the work of Alexander Sokurov and Sergey Shnurov.

Keywords

Genealogy of St Petersburg, Kunstkamera, museum, cinema, technical reproducibility, digital technology, Hermitage, Aleksander Sokurov, Sergey Shnurov

In the beginning there is a problem of translation, bifurcating the techniques of archivization. The word “liquid” posits problems and obstacles, and wavers between liquidity (fluidity, stream), liquid (as in cash), liquidation (as in destruction), and liquor, as in a drink. These homonyms are abyssal. Just like the very word homonym (*omonimia*) in Russian, which, if we are to believe Lev Rubinstein from a recent article in *Ekho Moskvy* (Rubinstein 2017), derives from *Omon* (ОМОН). So to each language its untranslatable homonyms of liquidation. After this dubious *captatio benevolentiae*, let us inspect (as one says of a picture), this strange, fluid, liquid metaphor. It posits the following. Current video and digital media, by means of video or mp streaming, by means of electric current, by their capacity to quasi-indefinitely reproduce everything they touch, take away from any art object its authentic auracity, and transform archivization in ways that put into question (or in fact radicalize the potential of) the current modes of museification and archivization of art. Most museum collections may be streamed on any computer, anyplace. The presentation of this essay when first presented in the Garazh Gallery in Moscow was video streamed. These so-called new media put into question not only that, but the very production of art itself, its very definition. As many theoreticians of art and archive have noted, current modes of museification and archivization annul the very thing they archive. Such annulling, or, here we are with the first translation, liquidation, elimination, of the classical notion of art, is captured by numerous essays that see in the museum practice itself destruction and liquidation. That force of liquidation has been at work in the museum from the very beginning. From Theodor Adorno’s essay on the museum in Valery and Proust, (“museums are the family sepulchres of works of art” [1967: 179]), to Eugenio Donato’s landmark essay on *Bouvard and Pecuhet*, “Museum’s Furnace” (1978) (furnace makes it an ominous title that invokes the holocaustic possibility of burning every trace of the archive, up to their cinders—Donato here operates in close proximity to Jacques Derrida, the destruction of the trace and archive fever), Douglas Crimp’s *On the Museum’s Ruins* (1993), to *Museum Memories*

by Didier Maleuvre and his conclusion that “The Apocalypse is the truth of the museum. Unlike the ruin [...] the museum destroys memory [...] as on Judgement Day, nothing is remembered, because everything is inextricably present” (1999: 278). All these posit in one way or another a liquidation of art in both the age of the museum, and in the age of technical reproducibility, computerized taxonomization and archivization, etc. We should remember the Apocalypse from the last quote, since it will wait for us at the end of my presentation. I promise you the Apocalypse at the end.

The forces at work, *un-work* the museum as public sphere, as analyzed by Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas. As argued in *Museums and Public Sphere* by Jennifer Barrett, by including the “new forms of visitation and engagement via electronic means, the museum demonstrates an awareness of the history of its practices” (2011: 7). However, the electronic means introduces into the museum a radical exteriority, challenging the “spheric,” opening it up to the *network* and, in the age of the anthropocene and global warming, *atmo-spheric*, affecting the museum as a “public sphere.” The electric *current* as well as the atmospheric heat of the global sphere, the leaking of the ozone into the atmosphere, radically exteriorize the museum space. The museum content, be it that of cultural representation, a model of civil society or the place of discursive exchange, leaks into the atmosphere become public. In a word, the electric *jolts* the notion of the public sphere as emblemized by the museum: the current, the flow, the leak, and the liquid, becomes the history of public space (“becomes,” as in changes into another aggregate, but also, if as a transitive verb, meaning “is appropriate to it,” the two meanings of “to become”).

Technical reproducibility put to work by modernity brings to light, so to speak, what is in museum practice in the first place. Art both deposited or reproduced is slated to its obliteration, it is, in a word, liquidated, abandoned to rest, by the very technique that makes it work. And that liquidation in our time is happening by means of its liquefaction, being turned into a liquid gaze of video streaming, liquidation that such liquid memory brings about.

In his *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* (2008), Walter Benjamin himself uses exactly this word, “liquidation,” to speak about the condition in which the new mediatic reproduction places art: “When Abel Gance fervently proclaimed in 1927, ‘Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films. [...] All legends, all mythologies, and all myths, all the founders of religions, indeed, all religions, [...] await their celluloid resurrection, and the heroes are pressing at the gates,’ he was inviting the reader, no doubt unawares, to witness a comprehensive liquidation” (...so hat er, ohne es wohl zu meinen, zu einer umfassenden Liquidation eingeladen) (Benjamin 2008: 22).

On the one hand, art is liquidated by this hyper-mnemonic archivization, both cinematically, photo- and video-graphically, by what happens

to it in the museum, and by means of economy, by means of cash, money, the economic liquidity itself. But strangely, what liquidates it brings it a new aura by making it enter a supplementary economy of art market or by means of moving what is an aura into reproducibility itself, giving it a chance to survive, or to return. One has to go with the *flow* or with the auratic *glow*. In his “Voiti v potok” (Enter the flow) (2013a), Boris Groys writes: “One can always join the universalist tradition [emblemized by the Internet in Groys’ essay] by entering its flow, by dispersing in it. And one does not even have to enter the stream, it is enough to go down to it and document that descent” (Vsegda možno prisoedinit’sia k universalistskoi traditsii, vvodia ee v potok, pytaias’ rasseiat’ ee. I vovse ne nuzhno vkhodit’ v potok—dostatočno spustit’sia k nemu i zadokumentirovat’ etot spusk) (Groys 2013a).¹

Let us give a few examples that can be found in Russian museums.

The Museum that exemplifies by itself its own techno-mediatic reproducibility is the *Kunstkamera*, in fact the first Russian museum, founded in St Petersburg by Peter the Great (Kujundzic 1997; Iampolsky 1996). In it, specimens are preserved in formaldehyde, and it also contains the death mask of its founder, Peter the Great, by Rastrelli, thus combining the natural with cultural, esthetic and eternal with the preservation of biodegradables in formaldehyde. The *Kunstkamera* actually already operates like a *camera*, it is a *camera obscura* of modernity in which the projected images of Russian modernization reflect themselves in the specimen preserved in the liquid formalin. It is the place in which the museum gaze preserves its own doubling, and it is not by chance that it puts on display all sorts of twins, bi-headed calves, and Siamese twins. What the museum liquidated in life, it preserved in the liquid.

The *Kunstkamera* operates by means of these techno-archival snapshots, and puts on display the processes of techno-visual reproducibility. (Fixing the film, the pellicule, the little skin, in the stabilizing liquid, during the process of developing qua mummification, is, as famously stated by Andre Basin, at the origin of cinema.) In the *Kunstkamera*, some of the specimen are even photoshopped and beautified. The museum, and the entire city, arguably, operates like a cinematic machine, recording and doubling itself over the images of its own preservation. The river flow of the Neva itself, its stream, is interrupted by the bridges that operate as

¹ See also Boris Groys and his analysis on the mausoleum as museum and more recent writings on “The Museum as Mediatic Sphere” (Muzei kak medial’naia sreda) (2000), and his essay, the title of which is directly related to my own, “Entering the Flow: Museum Between Archive and Gesamtkunstwerk” (2013b)—quite appropriately published in the journal *e-flux*—or the other quoted above, “Enter the Flow”; and Mikhail Iampolsky’s essay on *Kunstkamera* and Tynianov’s “Wax Effigy,” without which I could not have written my own essay on *Kunstkamera*, the Museum, and the Form/aldehyde of History in my book *The Returns of History* (1997).

a suspension of temporality, like a wing disk on the camera, the obturator, they cut into the flow of the river qua history (“Neva derzhavnoe techenie,” [Neva’s majestic flow] is always already a nature-culture, political, historical, symbolic). The most famous image of this interruption or suspension of the revolutionary flow is the scene in Sergei Eisenstein’s *October* (1927), with a dead horse hanging from it. The bridges here suspend or interrupt the flow of the river, already marked by technical reproducibility, the newspaper *Pravda* flowing beneath them, and the shots made with the *Kunstkamera* in the background. One should note that each night, in St Petersburg, on the Neva, numerous boats gather and wait for the lifting of the bridges, the bodies on the water as if in a quasi-Messianic expectation of a miracle proffered here by the technique of suspended bridges interrupting the flow of the river and temporality. This aspect of the city of St Petersburg, at the same time the museum space par excellence, and the techno-mediatic flow of its own reproducibility, the twinning in its archival memory, is captured at the end of Alexei Balabanov’s *Of Freaks and Men* (1998). In the penultimate scene, we see the filmmaker watching his own film while we are facing the projector. The last scene superimposes the gramophone onto the Neva flowing toward the Hermitage and the *Kunstkamera*, and the record with the label featuring the photograph of the twins dissolves into the river flow itself, thus turning the river into a musical and video stream, and the whole city into an apparatus of cinematic and video streaming projection and archival, gramophonic retention and archivization. The museum is recalled here by the twins who die in the film and would be slated for the formaldehyde in the *Kunstkamera*, which itself undergoes the doubling and twinning by means of the photoprosthesis reproduction, liquifaction and liquidation, thus turning the whole city of St Petersburg into what it has been from the beginning, a totalizing apparatus of recording, archiving, and projection of its own “contemporaneity” and “modernity.” The paradoxical museum of modernity.

Aleksander Sokurov’s *Russian Ark* (2002), a movie about the most famous Russian museum, the Hermitage, begins out of blindness, which opens onto the vigilance of history, a single shot video film. Or rather, already museified history and, in that sense, “history.” Perhaps, the movie does not open, or begin, but begins as an imitation of history, fashioning itself after it, as its iteration, repetition, mimesis. And, at the same time, as its unique, singular and inimitable record, memory, and archivization. *Russian Ark* is a movie about the Russian *arkive* or archive fever.

The narrator’s voiceover inaugurates a loss of memory from the very beginning. “I open my eyes and see nothing, what happened to me I do not remember” (Otkryvaiu glaza I nichego ne vizhu, chto so mnoi proizoshlo, ne pomniu). The movie about the archive therefore opens on nothingness and the loss of memory, or the incapacity to commemorate (I do not remember anything), it unfolds as its own mnemonic and visual erasure.

Russian Ark allows precisely for such in-visibility to be put on display. The one long take of the museum films the very ruination of culture. The total cultural archive of Russia is seen here as it were for the first and the last time, simultaneously. For the first time: in all its “life,” at the time and place of its origin, captured by the “live” gaze of the video camera. The camera captures the very life of the culture, an entire epoch at the source and the origin of its historical and political appearance. And, simultaneously, *Russian Ark* films the very ruin of that history, history as ruin, and the archival opulence of the lost world.

Russian Ark can also be said to actualize and make use of, and erase an entire epoch that is lodged within it as a source of melancholic loss. The museum in the film or as filmed operates both as a machine of erasure as well as preservation. The repressed other of the represented history, its ruinous subtext, Soviet Russia, haunts the movie like a ghost, and lurks in the intertextual interstices of *Russian Ark*. The movie operates as a colossal attempt to do the impossible: to erase the historical period that has in turn obliterated the tradition represented in the film. The Hermitage is thus meant to cover the entire epoch of the Soviet art and cinema. Soviet art insistently pushes through in the repressed references to Eisenstein, Kazimir Malevich, or Dziga Vertov. The endings of Vsevolod Pudovkin’s *The Last Days of Petersburg* (1927) and Eisenstein’s *October* end in the same place, the Jordan Stairwell in the Winter Palace. The two endings of the two classics of modernist cinema are quoted at the end of *Russian Ark* but in a semantically and ideologically reversed direction. In that sense, Sokurov’s film about the museum is an ark that leaks history.

Sokurov’s *Francofonia* (2015), a film about the Louvre, also offers a reflection of its own preservation and archivization, already at work in the museum. I want to draw your attention to a long take of the mummy in the Louvre in *Francofonia*. The strangeness, the otherness that comes to the fore here is the very death preserved forever in the form of the preserved mummified body that received it, which is also, as Andre Basin said, the origin of cinema. This reminds us of the *Kunstkamera* or of the Mausoleum qua Museum in Moscow, *pace* Groys. On the other hand, the etymology of the Louvre may be illuminating for our purposes, because it introduces reproducibility and also sacrificial rituals and politics, into the very name of the museum, its etymology and genealogy.

There are three possible etymologies for the name the Louvre. The Louvre possibly derives from 1) a hunting ground for wolves (*lukhos*, *lupus*, *lupara*, *louve*, *loup*); 2) the sublime work of art (*l’oeuvre*); or 3) a two-purpose derivative, chimney opening (*l’ouvert*) or skylight (*lucis*) (Charnock 1859: 166), which in Roman times, as in the Roman Pantheon, never far from a she-wolf, were combined in one *oculus*, the eye in the roof, letting the light in, and allowing the smoke generated by the burnt animal sacrificial offerings, to escape.

The Louvre, I would like to argue, operates in Sokurov's *Francofonia* as *obturateur*, a wing disk in a camera, letting the light in and out, but also vigilantly shedding light over the sacrificed art and gaze. In Sokurov, museum always keeps the memory of the possibility of this sacrificial machine at work within it.

The museum, this time the Hermitage, is thus often associated with the darkest moments of the history of this city, the blockade of Leningrad, as in *Russian Ark* or in Sokurov's *Reading the Blockade Book* (2009), which ends on the Hermitage in the winter night.

In his two most recent videos, *Exponat* (Exhibit, Jan 2016), and *V Pitere-pit'* (In Peter—a Drink, April 2016), Sergey Shnurov takes up dominant tropes of St Petersburg classical poetry: “Okno v Evropu,” “*labotinki*” Louboutin, (“obmanchivi ... kak nozhki ikh” in Pushkin), the encounter between St Petersburg and Russian culture with the West, most notably France, but also puts to use some of the most enduring tropes pertaining to the city of Leningrad, that of the siege (filming, for example, *Exponat* near the Museum of the Defense of Leningrad on Gangutskaia).

He does so by engaging these tropes in the explicit context of digital technology. Both video clips start with an image of the computer: Skype, internet pornography, internet and video surveillance, cellphones that students are looking at during lectures, so familiar to all of us teaching. To this Shnurov juxtaposes a desire to shed the straight jacket and the limitations of the technical and technological dominance in favor of certain life immediacy, festivity and jouissance, and liquidation of the museified life in favor of liquor (*V Pitere-pit'*). In fact, the protagonists of *V Pitere-pit'*, by plying themselves with vodka, perform a technological reversal of the *Kunstkamera* and the modes of preservation in spirit, filling themselves with the alcohol, in fact symbolically imbibing the liquid used to preserve the specimen in the *Kunstkamera*. (We should recall the advice to Major Kovalev in Gogol's *The Nose*, to put the nose in two tablespoons of vodka in order to preserve it.) Instead of the eternally preserved death, they imbibe the liquor and thus museify themselves in life, walking around the city of St Petersburg as living specimen, living museum exhibition, the larger than life superhuman inspired by the liquid spirit. But also, these protagonists walk around as the *living* embodiments of the survival of Apocalypse, appearing at the end of the clip with the museum, the Hermitage, in the background, thus appearing not far from Sokurov's *Russian Ark*. But this celebratory shedding off of the alienation of technology is of course done with the full activation of the video, electric guitar, musical and video flow, doubling the liquor and the liquidity of the musical and video stream.

This may explain the scene in *V Pitere-pit'*, in front of the painting in the Russian Museum, *The Last Day of Pompeii* by Karl Briullov, the Apocalypse at the heart of the museum space, in which the children do not listen to the lecture but watch and listen to their iPhones. And we should

note that the clip ends with the consumption of liquor, liquidation and liquefaction of the museum, the Hermitage. On the other hand, his *Exhibit (Exponat)* engages references to Van Gogh, and the conditions of viewing the work of art in the age of digital technology. Let us only gesture to the fact that the most famous polemics about Van Gogh in the twentieth century, between Meyer Shapiro and Martin Heidegger, as summarized in Jacques Derrida’s *La Verite en Peinture* (Truth in painting 1987), also involves Van Gogh’s *Shoes* (just like Shnurov’s *Exponat* focuses on Van Gogh and the Louboutins). For our purposes, let us remember Derrida’s admonition that without the signature as shoelace, or shoelace as signature (ignored by both Heidegger and Shapiro) there would be no work of art: in order to make a work of art, to lace it all up together, one needs a signature *shnurok*, in a word, one needs a *Shnur*.

Shnurov is not alien to self-liquifaction and self-liquidation in the museum, or to the reflection on the processes of liquefaction and liquidation. For example, in his exhibit at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art (Summer 2017), his installation “Death of Sugar,” ends in the extinction and liquidation of the excess of pleasure, sugar, placed in a funeral casket, with the sign of the blood of global economy, the liquid Coca Cola (never mind at this point Alexander Kosolapov’s Coca Cola and conceptualism). The black blood of the global and Russian economy, the liquid of oil, in another picture, is painted as “Made in Russia,” “with gusto” (as if it were a coffee). The digital as ordinary is emblemized by a *smilik* (smiley) qua egg yoke; the digital as posthumous erects a cellphone as a grave monument; and of course there is the self-liquifaction and liquidation by means of drinking, *V Pitere–pit’*, from the video clip, which ended up liquidated in the modern museum, and the painting executed, as it is said about painting, liquidated, since painted right on the substrate of the video stream freeze frame.

And lastly, Shnurov recently released a parodic clip ventriloquizing and parodying Russian Nationalism and the desire to return a museum and a cathedral purely back to the realm of sacrificiality and religious ritual. I am referring to the appropriation of the Isakievsky Sobor by the Russian Orthodox Church.

Ponaedut kozly-rotozei
I tarashchat svoi b...’ glaznitsy.
Podavaj, vidish’ li, im muzei,
A liudiam, mozhet, negde molit’sia.
Merikosy, iaposhki, prussaki,
Bezdukhovnost svoiu vsiudu seia,
Ispohabit’ hoteli Isaakij
No podnialas’ sviatia Rosseia.
I teper oni brodiat, sobaki,
Oshalelo povsiudu glazeia.

“Ne podskazhete, gde zdes’ Isaakij?”
“A netu, tetia, takogo muzeia.”²

The Apocalyptic is the ritualized appropriation of the museum, delivering the museum to its final days. According to some respectable reports, for example by prominent journalist such as Aleksey Venediktov, Editor-in-Chief of the Echo Moskvy Radio Station, the campaign against the film *Matil'da* (2017) by Aleksey Uchitel' and the liquidation of *Isakii* (Isaac) as the museum are *events of the same order*, preparing the making of the *Isaakievskiy Sobor* (St Isaac's Cathedral) into a mausoleum for the remains, relics (*moshchy*) of the tsarist family. The transfer from the Peter and Paul church into *Isaakievskiy Sobor* and exhibiting recently the DNA-asserted remains of the tsarist family as relics, require the liquidation of any alternative space of representation or interpretation qua museum, of the tsarist regime and history: “the sacred remains in a museum, which are venerated by people, how is that compatible with the museum?” (v muzee moshchi, kotorym poklaniaiutsia liudi, [...] kak eto sovместit'?) (Venediktov 2017). Thus, this placement of the Tsarist family liquidated by the Bolsheviks, will affect the complete reversal of the “public” sphere emblemized by the representation of body parts in formaldehyde in the first Russian museum, the *Kunstkamera*, just across the river, into the *presentation* of the literalized bodily remains as desiccated mummified *moshchy* testifying to the Apocalyptic last days and resurrection into or as eternal death. That this mausoleum of the last tsarist family will in that mode of preservation and veneration of the relics, of the *moshchy*, resemble the mausoleum as museum of Lenin (the mummified body of the politician who in fact liquidated the last tsarist family) is a revealing irony. In fact, this religious archive is or will be no less technological, but harking back to the pre-cinematic (as already said, the mummies and the technique of their preservation are in fact in the origin of cinema), reconstructing an ideological illusion of pure presence, a pure archive without mediation. This archive guards itself from

² Those goat gapers will come,
Gawping with their f***** eye,
Yes, give them a museum, you bum,
And the people may have nowhere to pray.
The Japs, the Krauts, the Yankee,
Brooding eveywhere, mindless,
They wanted to defile Isakii,
But Saint Russia rose up in their face.
And now, they are roaming, the dogs, everywhere,
Gazing crazily as they turn,
— «Could you please tell me where is Isakii here?»
— «Lady, there is no such museum.»

the other. That cinematic, archival envy may be at the bottom of attempts to eliminate the film *Matil'da* from the public sphere, it is an attempt to liquidate one mode of archivization, the cinematic, and supplant it with another, more archaic one. That archaic archival mode as pure presence (the dried-up body exposed to religious veneration), however, just like Lenin's mummy, borders on or invokes eternal death. One mode of archivization, cinema, spectralizes and archivizes life and love-life of the last Russian tsar or his family, and the other, the veneration of desiccated, mummified remains, relics, *moshchy*, archives and venerates his eternal death. This archival competition again takes the guise or figure of the city of St Petersburg as a cinematic projection. In his own video intervention about this event, Shnurov opens up that now endangered museum space to a different, non-apocalyptic, videomatic arrival, survival overcoming life reconstituted in the orgiastic life flow, in a celebration of the flow of liquor become the flow of video and musical stream, life become art.

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