

## **ROSTA**

### **MIKHAIL CHEREMNYKH, AMSHEY NURENBERG, IVAN MALYUTIN, VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY AND ANONYMOUS WITH DARJA BAJAGIĆ, FABIO MAURI, CADY NOLAND**

Organized with Olivier Renaud-Clément

«Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame. You would feel frightened because it is out of the order of nature. » James Baldwin, *My Dungeon Shook, Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation*, 1963.

At the end of the 80s, at the start of perestroika, Gerd Sander - August Sander's grandson - began a collection of works on paper: RosTA. These works are now part of Marcel Brient's collection. They were produced between 1917 and 1921 by artists such as Mayakovsky, Cheremnykh, Maliutin, Nurenberg... In 2020, the New Galerie is organizing with Olivier Renaud-Clément an exhibition where part this collection is shown.

In 1917, after the October Revolution, the Bolshevik regime was fragile, and the country was weakened by the First World War. Four years of civil war - Red against White - followed. The support of the population was vital and central to the ideology of the revolutionary project. Anatoly Lounacharski - art theorist and renowned for his studies on the role of satire and laughter - was appointed Commissar of Education by the Bolsheviks. Lounacharski facilitated the engagement of avant-garde poets and artists. They invented a vast graphic vocabulary of agitprop, which was partly a result of circumstances and scarcity. There was no more paper for newspapers, no printing press, no radio, and the population was 70% illiterate.

In Moscow and Saint Petersburg, these artists collected news daily from the front lines from the Russian telegraph agency RosTA, which would become TASS, and urgently created works on paper. Lacking a printing press, they made them by hand using stencils. They displayed them first in the windows of the telegraph agency itself, then in those of empty shops. The RosTA windows consisted of successive narrative panels that developed a story or a political situation. They were reminiscent of comic strips. This communication used the word variants and simplified spelling decreed by the new government. A massive literacy campaign increased the potential audience. One has to imagine the shock of a population confronted with both a crisis of historical importance and its graphic and unprecedented artistic revolutionary translation. For some people, it was their first contact with political discourse or with writing.

However, the artists were inspired by a firmly anchored Russian tradition. Icons: the open-plan treatment of space, the absence of depth of background and the flat tint of colors. Loubki: satire, narrativity and the mixture of poetic and foul language.

Most of the RosTAs on display at the New Galerie date from 1920-1921 after the height of the Civil War. They had to rebuild, and their hopes for a world revolution were dwindling - the Spartacist revolt in Germany had already failed in 1919. The RosTAs, always with the same virulence, addressed a wide spectrum of subjects: hygiene, war orphans, hunger, the hypocrisy of European regimes. But they also pointed to new culprits: the overly "formalist-bureaucratic" official who could not adapt to the NEP, the "negligent" worker who could not produce an excess despite the situation.

One of the recurring and striking RosTA procedures was to associate the subtitled slogan "How is this possible?" with a huge question mark that took over the image. The "conclusion" followed in the next plates. If this "question-answer" device played by the rules of public education, in this context the questioning marked an existential, almost theological imperative. And it was often tragic.

Mikhail Cheremnykh was certainly the inventor of the vocabulary developed for RosTA - and the first to make wall newspapers. However, Vladimir Maiakovski was both the linchpin and the alchemist. On April 14, 1930, at 10:15 a.m., Maiakovski, who defiantly also played Russian roulette, shot himself in the heart. The poet who exhorted the youth to live "returned to the stars". He wrote his own epitaph two days before his death: "The lifeboat of love smashed against (every day) life. As they say, the incident is closed. With you, we are even. Don't blame anyone for my death. The deceased hates gossip. To hell with pain, anguish, and reciprocal wrongs! ... Be Happy!" 1930 marked the definitive seizure of power by Stalin. The latter ordered a national funeral for the man he described as the "poet of the Revolution."

In 1945, Fabio Mauri was 17 years old and saw the war come to an end. A friend of Pasolini, he belonged to an important family in Italian publishing. The former helped to import the first American comic books during the Between-Two-Wars Period. The images of the concentration camps arrived. Fabio Mauri was stunned. He did not speak for a year and underwent at his own request thirty-three electric shock treatments in a psychiatric hospital. Until his death in 2009, Fabio Mauri kept coming back to this period. He readily said of himself that he had "a certain eye for Evil". His work deals with the world as it is, as it was, and as it should not have been.

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Although his intention to analyze is obvious, Fabio Mauri's use of fascist and Nazi propaganda iconography immediately causes viewer unease. Society has buried these signs - their use is even a crime in many countries. Seeing a portrait of Goebbels in a gallery in Paris in 2020 that was produced by Fabio Mauri in 1984 and soberly titled "Goebbels" continues to provoke revulsion.

Like many European artists, Fabio Mauri was struck by the prize awarded in Venice in 1964 to Robert Rauschenberg: the emergence and consecration of American pop art. The art of the "victors" reflected a new society where European atrocities were avoided. And precisely, Fabio Mauri did not want to see authoritarian ideology as a "mishap". Fascism had been in power in Italy for 24 years, and for Fabio Mauri its horror was always a possibility on the horizon into which he never stopped projecting himself.

Fabio Mauri was often presented as a "missing link" between ZERO, Nouveau Réalisme, and Arte Povera - anticipating or revisiting some of their programmatic lines. With ZERO and New Realism, he shared an interest in monochromes and a "morality" of artistic decluttering. Like the artists of Arte Povera, he was convinced of the eminently political dimension of any material used. Perhaps Fabio Mauri's best-known series is his "Schermi", his screens. Originally monochromes, these white canvases were designed in the form of a screen by a wooden or metal structure. The blank screen became a projection medium for the viewer's thoughts, while suggesting to him that all the images he thought of were as if split off from the flow of the film industry and propaganda films. Fabio Mauri often created an orientation to the scope of each screen by giving it a title. The series presented at the New Galerie is entitled: "Warum ein Gedanke einen Raum verpestet? Perché un pensiero intossica una stanza? (Why Does a Thought Infects a Room?) For Fabio Mauri, evil was always before us, elusive and inexorable like a cinematographic projection. Each Schermo presented at the gallery bears a short inscription in Gothic letters in German: "die kriegswitwe" (the war widow), "gasmasken" (gas masks), "arbeitseinschätzung" (work audit) ... In this context, the Nazi period and propaganda immediately come to mind. However, in a movement reminiscent of that of the Bolsheviks in 1917, Hitler decided to simplify the German language and to abandon Gothic for Roman writing in 1941.

For Fabio Mauri, ideology was an object of perpetual concern which he tried to grasp as a writer, as a playwright and as an artist. In the basement of the New Galerie, the artwork "Senza ideologia" (Without Ideology) (1975) consists of the projection of Eisenstein's film "Alexander Nevsky" on a pail filled with milk. Eisenstein's film, commissioned by the Stalinist authorities and released in 1938, recounted the struggle of the Russian hero Alexander Nevsky against the Teutonic knights in the 13th century.

The propaganda reach of the film is beyond doubt. In one of the film's most famous scenes, the Battle of Lake Peipus, we see this lake of ice giving way under the horses of the Germans and swallowing them up. The milk is a reminder of the visual omnipresence of snow in the film, but by giving an everyday object the screen role, Fabio Mauri anchored the epic images in the Modesty of the Real.

In 1989, Cady Noland - the major artist whose work deals with the broken promises of the American Dream - wrote an important essay: *Toward a Metalanguage of Evil*. Marcel Brient has been a visionary collector and supported very early the artist's work. The piece featured in the exhibition comes from his collection.

Cady Noland was born in 1956 in Washington, DC, the official heart of American power and a city with an extremely broad population spectrum, even on an American scale. Her essay, almost sociological, correlates the figure of the "psychopath" and that of the "male entrepreneur". Both - she says in the words of psychiatrist Ethel Spector - "share a common social recognition. The only thing that differentiates their actions and maneuvers is a matter of decibels, the psychopath's resonating the loudest." In a 1995 interview, she adds: "the male entrepreneur model excuses all kinds of heinous behavior if it brings success."

For Cady Noland, the psychopath - the figure at the center of her work - objectifies humans, just like the society in she lives. As an artist, she keeps coming back to her own work on objects. She evokes the way in which, in "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre", a cult horror film, slaughterhouse workers transfer their daily work on animals - objects - to humans. They cut them up with their shining instruments, fold them, put them in the freezer. A work of conservation.

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If Andy Warhol had already produced *Car Crash* and *Big Electric*, Cady Noland will always refuse to place this violence in an indulgent context. Cady Noland's production process takes up this negligent, adolescent cruelty of an America she portrays, incarnates, and abhors. Her works are imbued with absolute sincerity, while being possible props for which she accepts the Hollywoodian aspect. The original title is "Texas Chainsaw Massacre". Like a sinister Hollywood setback, Cady Noland mythologizes territories and eras. Her works with "Texas" in the title come tinted with a black vision of America in the 60s and the assassination of Kennedy.

The dizziness induced by Cady Noland's vision of America is perhaps even more acute: what if it was not about a loss of innocence, but about the fact that there has never been one. In the gallery, the artwork *Your Fucking Face* (1993-94, displayed for the first time at Paul Cooper Gallery in 1994) emerges as both an archaic and gleaming instrument coming straight out of the factory. The sculpture takes the form of a pillory, a former public punishment device. Wood is replaced by chrome. Three different sized openings for the hands and feet are not bored in it, but five placed in staggered rows. It's as if all the tortured victim's members - hands, feet, and head - were meant to be shackled in a perfectly geometric fashion.

The pillory is a punishment by restraint, and especially by public display. In the history of the United States, it refers to the image of the Puritans, of a narrow - even rural - community for whom the public organization of shame was a device of social control. The modifications made by Cady Noland to the device underline the fragmentation of the bodies, without knowing whether it is the front side (the hands, feet, head) or the back side (the vulnerable body deprived of its extremities) which are to be debased.

The use of industrial materials has the effect of sealing this cultural memory of exclusion in the present. The supposed American exemplarity, the idea of being "a city upon a hill — the eyes of all people are upon us", was initially stated by the Puritan John Winthrop at the beginning of the 17th century. It has been repeated by John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama and Ted Cruz. It resonates differently if we think that it is our *fucking face*, exhibited to our neighbor, which would become the place of discourse mixing disgrace, national harmony and self-righteous satisfaction.

Darja Bajagić was born in 1980 in Titograd, in the former Yugoslavia. In the early 2000s, her parents fled the last European war. The artist grew up in the United States, where she is now a resident. If her biography echoes the tragic European history of the twentieth century, Darja Bajagić is also a witness and a privileged analyst of the way in which the recent media and computer revolutions have changed our relationship to images, their content, their sources, their context, even their status.

Since the start of her career, the artist has been constructing paintings using images, texts, compositions, and processes drawn from what is often referred to as the "dark web": bloody news items, pornography, political extremism. ... Even though this type of material existed before the Net and social networks, the latter have nevertheless changed its nature. First, the ease of publication and searching, as well as algorithmic biases create "niche" expressions. Darja Bajagić has thus in several of her works reproduced sentences that serial killers had published on their personal blogs, read by a small audience.

The artist makes a constant back and forth between personal expression and social constraint, between seduction, innocence, and danger. A recurring figure in Darja Bajagić's work is the figure of the adolescent. Many of her previous series include photographs of missing young girls, of whom it is unknown if their absence is the result of just running away or a more dire fate. If the ambiguous figure of the young girl in danger is commonplace in the tabloid media, the status of how they are shown has been radically affected. Today, it is no longer official photographs (donated by family or the police) that are published but rather photographs taken from social media of the young girls. The collision of adolescents putting themselves out there with tragic events is paradigmatic for Darja Bajagić and testifies to the new experience that can be made with images and political discourse. This paradigm can be extended to other figures. We remember in France the emotion provoked by the publication of a photograph taken from the Facebook profile of one of those who perpetrated the attacks of 2015, where we saw him smiling, relaxed, as if "taken" in his private space.

Darja Bajagić's work oscillates between the vertigo of violence and a certain banality of the consumption of signs and the construction of the intimate. One of her very first works is a video in which she films, at the entrance of a nightclub, young girls from the Gothic community in Chicago. The dress code bias/choice, striking in the image, is defused by the candor of the questions: "What did you eat today?" A sad story? A happy story? "

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In the gallery, the painting *Transfiguration* features a faceless Domino, a porn actress who is a recurring figure or “muse” for the artist. Above her bust is a heraldic sun symbol with the face of Hanna Cura. The original picture of this child was published in 1945 newspapers to facilitate the reunification of the family of this displaced child in the Bavarian town of Kloster Indersdorf. The city was a center for displaced children at the end of World War II. The solar symbol is closely related to the idea of transfiguration. There is a complicated back and forth between objectification and star-making in the porn industry as well as between anonymity and sharing of the images after the displacement/relocation of children in World War II Germany. The painting is the shape of a shield, a classical coat-of-arms, like those that usually bear stylised elements that define and visually represent a country or family.

Three works from the series *Ex axes* are shown in the exhibition. These pieces have been foundational in the way the artist has been recognized ever since. In this series she carries out the basic act, almost absurd in its simplicity, of relocating images floating in the cyberspace which puts them on new grounds. She prints on axes images of pretty girls interacting with the axes. These images come from either the movies, pornography, or gothic and fanzine culture. This materialization “anchors” a specific genre of images and shows it not only through sociological analysis but also as an almost voyeuristic entry point in other people’s fetishism. If pictures today are being circulated on social media, they are also being displayed according to the *filter bubble* phenomenon where you see what your community is interested in. Darja Bajagic explores her obsessions and shares them beyond this cluster of interests. In the end, behind our fantasies, it is indeed the little axe we have in our hands and on the wall that is loaded with aggression, beauty and absurdity. Fantasy at our fingertips takes on a whole different meaning.

In contemporary Western democracies, the concept of propaganda covers a broad spectrum. It is associated, above all, with the defeated totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. To this propaganda from the past and elsewhere - with Noam Chomsky - we oppose ambient propaganda: a soft power that acts gently and as if by impregnation. In short, a spectacle society. The RosTA works presented at the gallery are artefacts from a historical moment as well as works of art. Art history covers a long time; we still appreciate works dating back several millennia. These are often works that societies have made an effort to keep as long as possible as witnesses to their identity in the future. Vladimir Mayakovsky or Ivan Malyutin are important avant-garde artists; we cannot say whether it is in spite of or because of their political actions and creations. In an exhibition, we still feel, through empathy, the violence of their acts. It seems that extremely contemporary history and its parade of fascination with brutality, invectives, falsifications, urgencies, instrumentalization of ideas but also revolts, show that we have perhaps a little quickly relegated propaganda to the past. Perhaps RosTA works of art still have something to tell us.