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Metamorphoses ...

The exhibition "About the Pole" consists of nine projects created by Olga Kisseleva with young artists, students of the Institute Pro Arte. The concept for the exhibition was proposed by Olga Kisseleva, an artist who's long been working in the sphere of new technologies. The students were given the task to interact with the exposition of the Arctic and Antarctic Museum; they were granted the opportunity to use the exposition as a sphere of action in the field of new technologies. Such a task is similar to a game with strict rules. The young artists had to penetrate into this alien territory and place their creations amongst the images, which constitute a complete sign system. The destruction of this system was forbidden, but at the same time the manifestation of one's individuality was required. "About the Pole" is some sort of "game of danger", something like a search for a way out of a maze full of traps.

Any museum is not only the reality of its interior and exhibits, but also the sum total of ideas merging into a peculiar mythological space. Only a naive visitor takes the Hermitage as a treasury of world art. In reality it's a palace full of intrigues and passions, an icon of Russian history, the embodiment of both imperial power and the St. Petersburg myth, and a symbol of world civilization. The richness of content of any museum, even a small one, is far greater than which is written in the blurbs to the exhibits. Every museum is more than reality, for it's the museum that achieves the connection between history and eternity. For any artist, going to a museum is alluring and frightening, it's some sort of rehearsal before Judgement Day.

None of the young artists from Pro Arte has ever been either to the Arctic or to the Antarctic. That's why they immediately face the immutable Hamlet question, which the Dutch prince put rhetorically to the actors of a travelling theatre: What is he to Hecuba? What is Hecuba to him? However, he sobs, everyone sobs, the mythical Hecuba is capable, again and again, of captivating people's hearts and minds with her sufferings. Art, in its essence, is the life of a myth eternally moving and changing. A museum, just like a text, is the fixation of that myth. Entering it is like making notes on the margin of an ancient book. Triviality? As a matter of fact, no. For only such notes, i.e. an interpretation, ensure the life of a myth. Without an interpretation a myth is like a vampire with an aspen stake driven into its chest.

The projects for the exhibition "About the Pole" are like notes made on the margin of a peculiar Petersburg myth - the myth of the Arctic and Antarctic Museum. In spite of the diversity of the projects, they are united by one thing - they are all creations of young people from St. Petersburg of the 21st century. Through slogans, adverts, the chaos of discos, the experience of going through and getting over the Soviet times, in their projects we see the vague desire to find a connection with the disappearing authenticity of a myth, a connection between the present and eternity. "Arctica for sale" reminds us of vendors in a temple, Chkalov is like an archangel Michael leading a troop of angels, radio operator Krenkel is like St. Anthony on an ice-floe, and "the house of a polar explorer" is like a shelter for a hermit in ancient Thebes. "About the Pole" is something that young people would like to add to a peculiar phenomenon of our city which is called the Arctic and Antarctic Museum.

In the centre of historic Petersburg, in a quarter adjacent to Vladimirsky market, and formerly occupied by merchants, there's a strange building similar to a hybrid of a Babylon ziggurat* and a Greek Doric temple. Its capacity is made up of three cubes placed one upon the other with an extravagant angle of architectural expressionism, contradicting the severe geometry of the overall layout. This building has little similarity to a church, and even less to an Orthodox Church, in a way reminding us of a Scandinavian Lutheran neoclassic or a Baptist chapel.

The strange building, Nickolskiy Edinoverie** church, was erected according to a project of the architect Melnikov between 1820-1826 with money from the Russian merchants. The Edinoverie movement, which expanded greatly at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, was an attempt to reconcile the official Orthodox Church and the Staroobryadtsy-Raskolniki*** in order to return them to the bosom of the Russian state system. The Raskolniki hated Petersburg and Peter the Great's reforms, and through an agreement with the Synod bargained for and obtained the right not to shave beards and not to wear Russian coats, so that the Edinoverie church, which was built in the centre of a accursed German town, had great importance to the reconciliation of Peter I with the followers of assassinated Prince Alexey. The wild fanatical Raskol movement, a civilisation rushing towards the Arctic ocean, suddenly found itself under the vaults of neo-greek, with this emphasizing the mystical quaintness of the Petersburg idea, a spectre of utopia on a swampy bog.

The Stalin era added poignancy to the Raskol-ancient oddity. The Nicholas church in 1934 was earmarked for a museum, exhibiting a strange display in a strange interior: the floor space is cluttered with stuffed fish and wild animals; in the galleries, works and handicrafts of the pagan Samoyeds **** are exhibited.

About what does the Arctic Museum's display tell us? Less about the North Pole, than about myths of Soviet heroism; about the harsh everyday life of laconic polar explorers; about the ecstatic fanaticism of the conquerors of the inaccessible ice; about the great Soviet empire, which erected a flagstaff with a red banner on the expanses of white silence. In the shabby revolutionary character of the old display untouched by perestroika, there is some sort of touching Raskol-communist-staroobryad character, which gives the neo-greek architecture of the late empire a special greatness. And the stuffed polar animals similar to guardian-angels of the communist pathos of the conquerors of the Universe, and birds gliding like the dried souls of the pilot-heroes frozen in the icy Arctic air.

Into this magical cut-off world flew a young flock of artists exploding the still quietness with motion and the sound of new technologies. Loudly laughing, a crowd of young and happy people flooded the dome, turning it, for a few minutes, into love-parade and dissolving the neoclassical stylishness of the Arctic whiteness into mixed diversity. Antarctica - for sale, the Antarctic devoured by labels; the polar explorers house, as an object of socio-art; the radio operator Krenkel, transformed into a chat user; all these projects tell us about the fact that today a myth, formerly severe and cold, has turned into a colourful and attractive fiction. Such a transformation proves its ability for metamorphosis, and that is a guarantee of its vitality.

*a rectangular stepped tower in ancient Mesopotamia, surmounted by a temple.

**edinoverie - an Old Believer sect which reached an organizational compromise with the official Orthodox Church.

***an old Russian religious order from the end of the 17th century

***northern Siberian people