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Performance by Olga Kisseleva

« ... Revolution gave to people not only freedom, in addition, it brought a possibility of a prosperous and cultivated live ».

J.V. Stalin, *Book of Delicious and Healthy Food*, 1952

Unlike Western countries and Western contemporary art, which have developed myriad ways to define and discuss the nuances of identity, Soviet identity had a clear and straightforward definition: it was collective, internationalist, and class-oriented. Not that such an identity really existed; it had to be coaxed into being via propaganda, media, education, and Socialist Realist art. The principal task of each of these was neither to please the masses, nor to elevate their taste, but to promote a new humankind who would express this new identity.

In 1936, a small but crucial step was made: Stalin commissioned from his Commissar for Food Industry a cooking book. Since no market existed on the Soviet territories, the book did not aim to give certain foods or restaurants a fashionable aura, or to increase the consumption of the Soviet people, or even to share some creative recipes. Instead, the new communist Empire was concerned with giving Soviet identity culinary expression - specifically, the fifteen republic's "friendship". (By the way, a salad called "People's Friendship" was a popular item on the menu of many Soviet restaurants.) According to the cookbook, Soviet cuisine aspired to be as international as communist ideology.

Some specialists believe the cookbook alluded to the structure of Soviet Marxism, which, as everyone knows, consisted of three main parts: German philosophy, English political economy and the French utopian socialist writings. According to the cookbook, healthy and delicious Soviet food similarly consisted of three parts: first, the traditional Russian cuisine and second, local dishes from each of the fifteen Republics. It is the third part that presents a perplexing ideological problem, as it was neither socialist, nor popular: the seemingly inexplicable influence of French cuisine.

The Soviet 1930s weren't initially very friendly with French cuisine. French food was too emblematic of the exploitation of the working class, too related to the damned tsarist past, and too tied to the decadence of capitalism. It ostensibly represented a set of values opposite those of the nascent Soviet identity. In fact, numerous books of the time, written by various directors of Soviet Institutes for Food Industry, summoned a death penalty for French cuisine and heralded new "liberatory" cooking modes. To liberate women from slavery in the kitchen and to collectivize eating, French food had to go. Simply put, food was part of production process and had to be approached as such - as rationally and pragmatically as possible.

However, alongside the unbeatable hit Olivier salad, which survived generations of tsars and party leaders, other famous Soviet entrées kept a bit of French history, albeit socialist in form and popular in content. For instance, "cotelette a la Kiev" was enjoyed in Russia since the 18th century as "cotelettes à la volaille". Far more spectacular are the metamorphoses of the famous Olivier salad. Originally made with grouse, veal tongue, caviar, lettuce, crayfish tails, and capers, as well as on occasion truffles, cubed aspic and smoked duck, the salad never contained potatoes - though they are the main ingredient in the contemporary version. No Soviet celebration was complete without one (or several) crystal bowls full of Olivier, transformed a la sovietique. If we analyze the ingredients closely, we see that other conspicuous substitutions were made. Instead of smoked duck, originally favored by Mr. Lucien Olivier, a plain chicken appears, while crayfish tails are replaced by cooked carrots--presumably to preserve some color while still democratizing the dish. Truffles, caviar, and capers disappeared all together. Such it is that the favorite dish of the Soviet table was born, having almost nothing in common with its bourgeoisie decadence, though proudly bearing its French name.

In the context of this exhibition, Kisseleva's presentation of the Olivier salad and other French dishes à la sovietique has several purposes. Food is by no means a new topic in art - it has long been a theme in artists' work, whether in painting, photography, actions, or performance. Neither has Kisseleva's work much to do with relational aesthetics, embodied by the well-known projects of Rikrit Tiravanija and Martha Rosler's "Semiotics of the Kitchen". Kisseleva's approach is context- and research-based, wherein the choice of dishes is the crucial element. Each of her carefully selected examples represent the most popular and famous dishes of the former Soviet territories. And each of them, despite the strong ideological will of the government and a series of government-endorsed makeovers, kept a bit of their Frenchness. Not only does Kisseleva want the French spectator to taste some extended Soviet utopia, but she recreates a certain culinary artistic idyll, where all ingredients (read: cultures) peacefully coexist. Indeed, salads are an exemplary symbol of the principle of non-discriminatory blend: all ingredients are equal and equally bound to each other by mayonnaise - a perfect instrument of ideological reconciliation.

