The Room of Laughter

Search for Russian Queer Art

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that no portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree, or qualification thereof, or for any other university or institute of learning.

I declare that this thesis is my independent work. All sources and literature are cited and included.

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Alexandr Melnikov

ABSTRACT

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This research uncovers the extent of diversity and vibrance of the Russian queer art and culture. Russia in recent years is notorious for its treatment of the LGBTQ+ community through the introduction of specific political and social policies that are supposed to convoy Russia back to its traditional values. However, it is crucial to fundamentally understand what the queer community is through the investigation of its Western terminology and theory. Analyzing the implications of queer theory, one may apply similar principles to queer art. Through examination and indication of the meaning of queer art, it becomes apparent that it is about the manifestation of your right to be and to express yourself. The development of Russian queer art and culture throughout history to a great extent impacts the final art project, series of paintings and installations under the title: *The Room of Laughter*. Particular research and the final art project illustrate the significance of discovering the personal identity and the journey of self-acceptance.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Context and Statement of Relevance

The Room of Laughter is a literal translation of the Russian term *Комната Смеха*, which means *house of mirrors* in English. The reason for implementing the literal translation for this particular research and my final art project is to highlight the cultural differences, as well as to play with the meaning of *The Room of Laughter* in a complex context of Russian queerness. *Deformed*, *odd,* and *funny* reflections from the mirrors in a house of mirrors symbolize how Russian queer individuals are perceived by the public and Russian authorities.

Growing up in an ethnically Russian household in Kazakhstan, and moving to the Czech Republic at the age of puberty I was puzzled with uncovering my identity. Discovering my queerness only fueled further questions. Therefore, the final art project *The Room of Laughter,* and this research is a dense journey of self-expression. Moreover, particular inspirations could be applied for the final art project through the investigation of queerness and queer theory in Russian art and culture. The battle of existence in an *odd* society is reflected in my art, essentially adopting the uniqueness of Russian queer language, history, and culture.

The rise of globalist conservative leaders in the world further oppresses, discriminates, and spreads unnecessary violence towards individuals of my kind. The tension between the LGBTQ+ community and Russian authorities, for instance, drastically increased with the introduction of the anti-gay propaganda law in 2013. Torture, extrajudicial killings, even concentration camps against queer individuals

became common in constituent republics of Russia, like Chechnya. Furthermore, country leader Vladimir Putin ultimately consolidated his power bypassing the Constitution Amendment in 2020, which not only guarantees his presidency until 2036 but also defines family as a union only between a man and a woman, thereby formally stigmatizing queerness. Thus, it is relevant to explore queer theory and its implications in arts to ultimately acknowledge the existence of the Russian LGBTQ+ community and start a conversation, hence creating awareness of such tangled issues.

1.2 Questions Posed and Thesis Statement

Developing research in such a comprehensive topic, it is crucial to set specific boundaries that would eventually lead to the development of my final art project, *The Room of Laughter*. The questions I posed that guided my research and thoughts are: To what extent queer theory could be applied in queer art? What kind of evidence, and how much is enough to make something queer? What can we learn from queerness in Russia? How is Russian queerness unique? Who are the prominent queer artists in Russian history? What do queer artists demonstrate with their art? And finally how have I integrated Russian queer art, history, and language into my artistic creations?

Abridging the extensive definition of queer art and its purposes could be borrowed through understandings of queer theory, which then could be applied in mapping the history of queerness in Russia and most importantly of its arts. Through the process of complex research of the development of Russian queer art, it could be argued that my personal experience, as well as specific Russian queer artists, customs, and language to a great extent, contributed to the overall concept of the final art project, *The Room of Laughter*.

1.3 Methodology and Chapter Forecast

Queer as a theory is already highly complex on its own. Analyzing arts through the queer lens in a country that has been stigmatizing and marginalizing the queer communities on an institutional level is strenuous. However, ironically, Russian authorities' persecution of queer individuals in recent years only sparkled a new interest in the topic with prominent art institutions, such Garage Museum of Contemporary Art; new online queer platforms on Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube rediscovering Western queer academic literature and re-applying it to the context of Russia. The secondary sources included online articles, podcasts, videos, and lectures, mostly collected from the emerging Russian queer collectives, such as *Otkrytiye*, *TËTKI*, *Russian Queer Revolution*, *Uraniya*, as well as Karen Shainyan's YouTube channel, S*traight Talk with Gay People*.

Additionally to the research of secondary sources, I have contacted several academics of queer and gender studies in the Czech Republic, such as Pavla Jonssonová and Ladislav Zikmund-Lende who were extensively helping me in research of queer theory. Furthermore, a distinguished philosopher and art theorist, Tomáš Hříbek guided me through academic sources of queer art, providing access to a number of valuable sources that are presented in this research. The ability to communicate in Russian was crucial in overall research, as most primary and secondary sources are in Russian. Unfortunately, due to ongoing government restrictions against the COVID-19 pandemic created various challenges in collecting primary sources. Nevertheless, I was able to contact several Russian queer creators, such as Sergey Bondarev and Alexandr Blanar, who shared with me their experience and knowledge regarding Russian queer art.

Some primary and secondary sources collected for this particular research have no analogs in English, which forced me to directly translate them. That is why the translation might be to some extent differ from the original texts. Although, most concepts regarding queer theory and queer art are pulled from the scope of Western academics, which were often presented in English. It is also worth noting that the images of my artistic creations in Chapter 5 are under my pseudonym, which is Sasha Vitov.

Chapter 2

Understanding of *Queer*

2.1 Terminology

Queer as an official term for individuals of sexual or gender minorities has only been used for approximately 40 years, and is still *odd* for the majority of Russians, which is expected, as the term is closely tightened into Anglo-Saxon history. Moreover, the list of minorities associated with queer is never-ending and is constantly expanding, creating a heated debate over a clear definition of the term. Therefore, it is crucial to define what queer is for the further understanding of this particular research and the overall final art project, *The Room of Laughter*. According to Christopher Reed, "the rise of the term queer reflected the loss of faith in the coherence of *gay* or *lesbian* identity and was intended to unite a wide range of constituencies opposed to conventional notions of sexuality and gender" (231), which illustrates that anybody outside of heterosexual or cisgender majority could be labeled as queer.

It is important to mention that the term was used against sexual or gender minorities in the West till the 1980s. The original meaning of queer meant *odd*, *oblique,*

or *perverse*, from German and started to be used in 16th Century ("Queer"). However, the sudden shift of its meaning happened due to the AIDS pandemic, which promoted violence towards the LGBTQ+ community. Reed explains, "[the term] was exploited as a badge of honor by the loose-knit political coalition Queer Nation, which was founded in 1990 on the model of ACT UP, but with the aim of focusing on issues other than AIDS" (231). Since then, the term queer was popularised among the public and is currently an official umbrella title for the individuals of the LGBTQ+ community. Queer consequently carries political and social connotations.

Although, some queer theorists believe that heterosexual and cisgender people who dress or look *odd* should also be included in the term. Thus, the title is often criticized for its ambiguity from the heterosexual community, as well as in some cases by the representatives of the LGBTQ+ community. However, one of the most influential gender theorist, Judith Butler argues:

> The terms *queens*, *butches*, *femmes*, *girls*, even the parodic reappropriation of *dyke*, *queer*, and *fag* redeploy and destabilize the categories of sex and the originally derogatory categories for homosexual identity. All of these terms might be understood as symptomatic of "the straight mind," modes of identifying with the oppressor's version of the identity of the oppressed. (156)

This demonstrates that the term should exclusively be applied to the individuals of the LGBTQ+ community.

2.3 Queer Theory

The field of sociological studies, such as queer theory has quickly become legitimized by the end of the 20th Century after the term *queer* was officially recognized. The implications of queer theory are significant for more insight understanding of the

final art project, *The Room of Laughter*, as the supporters of this particular theory believe that the gender and sexual orientation of an individual are to some extent constructed by the socio-cultural environment and conditions of personal upbringing. The main goal of queer theory is to find a tool for deconstructing the existing monolithic ideals of social norms, as well as to find out how these norms arose and why. David M. Halperin, a theorist in the fields of gender studies and queer theory, and author of *How to be Gay* (2012) elaborates:

> The rejection of essentialism did not prevent the original founders of queer theory from asking, "What do queers want?" or from exploring the particularities of gay culture. But as queer theory has become institutionalized, the understandable reluctance to accept essentialist assumptions about lesbians and gay men has hardened into an automatic selfjustifying dogmatism, a visceral impulse to preempt the merest acknowledgment or recognition of any cultural patterns or practices that might be distinctive to homosexuals. (63)

The subject that has been taboo for centuries was suddenly investigated critically by academia, which begun to recreate a full portrait of a person with a queer identity, exploring extensively the implications of queer culture.

Chapter 3

Queer Art

3.1 Boundaries

Queer art embodies a collection of artworks, which are influenced by the cultural discourse of the queer community. Furthermore, it also includes any artwork that is produced by a creator with LGBTQ+ background. However, the boundaries of queer art

are complex, raising several questions, which must be evaluated and addressed in the research. It is important to take into consideration that the understanding of queer art is expanding and continuously shifting. Revising art history in favor of greater visibility of queer is taking place not just in theory but also in exhibition practice. Queer artworks are becoming an integral part of major world exhibitions, including the Venice Biennale, as well as in major world art museums, including Tate Modern.

Since one of the tasks of queer art is to reflect on the restrictive and prohibitive functions of the state and society, the majority of visual artists emphasize the flexibility and mobility of queer as a phenomenon. In fact, Halperin argues that queer art is about identity in the patriarchal society, dealing with the issues of being oppressed (419). Moreover, the professor of art history at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, David J. Getsy, in his book, *Queer* (2016) explains that "artists who identify their practices as queer today call forth utopian and dystopian alternatives to the ordinary, adopt outlaw stances, embrace criminality and opacity, and forge unprecedented kinships and relationships (12–23)," summarizing all possible aspects of what queer art could represent.

However, it is significant to dive deeper into searching for specific boundaries for queer art. German professor for gender research in literature and media studies, Irina Gradinari proposes to consider queer in several dimensions:

1. in the context of identity politics;
2. as a political movement uniting the carriers of alternative forms of sexuality and gender identity;
3. as an academic discipline in which social reality and subjectivity are viewed as

> constructs that arise as the effects of certain discursive technologies and regimes of truth and power relations (Ledenev et al. 284).

This proposed guidance by Gradinari for queer theory could also be used in establishing boundaries for queer art. For instance, queer art could reflect the search for one's own identity, exploring the full palette of possible alternatives. Moreover, queer art can serve as a tool for criticizing social hierarchies and practices that lead to the marginalization of a particular identity. Certain artists may depict various modalities of the experience of a particular identity to reflect on the language or history in an attempt to read them through the prism of gender, sexuality, etc. Finally, artists may act as documentaries of queerness as a social and political movement, inscribing it into a wide social and cultural context (Ledenev et al. 284). These three types of analysis of queer art to some extent establish boundaries in evaluating queer artworks and are pivotal in the assessment of the final art project, *The Room of Laughter,* or any other artwork with a queer context.

3.2 Queering & Queerating

The development of queer theory stretched to the analysis of queer art, which eventually led to the birth of new art terms, such as *queering* and *queerating*. The term *queering* simply refers to reading something through a queer lens, and "is used as a way to challenge heteronormativity by analyzing places in a text that utilize heterosexuality or identity binaries" (Burgett and Hendler 187–191). It is often used for historical analysis, however, queering could also be applied in analyzing or reinterpreting established works of art. Some artists may reinterpret specific social, cultural, or historic events through queer perspective, fitting a new narrative to a particular artwork that is commonly viewed from the orthodox perspective. The understanding of queering is critical for an extensive

overview of the final art project.

Another term that recently plunged into the art world is *queerating*. It is a form of curating but through a queer lens. An artwork that perhaps excludes any queer connotation is intentionally placed in a queer setting to reinforce a new interpretation. For instance, during the pandemic, Tate Modern began to organize an online Queer Festival, where the institution offered a specific number of queer collectives to participate in a queerating contest. According to their website, "[chosen queer collectives] will be choosing artworks from Tate's collection that speak to their local queer experiences, and rewriting traditional interpretations through their collective's queer lens. By sharing their queer readings of art, they aim to digitally disrupt borders to forge stronger international LGBTIQA+ community bonds" ("Celebrate the Powerful"). This new way of curating may help with the visibility of the minority groups that were marginalized for generations by the established art institutions.

Chapter 4

Russian Queer Art

4.1 Difference

Russia has been following its own, individual path in queerness, which contrasts the West. Some criticize queer art and queer theory for being too Western-centric, excluding the historical developments of queerness in various cultures. However, it is important to remember that the term itself originated in Anglo-Saxon cultures. The meaning and utilization of the label were slowly revolutionizing hand in hand with the development of Western society. Therefore, the term *queer* in Russia or any other

post-Soviet republic is still unhackneyed. The queer scene remains poorly visible both at the level of the artistic process and within the body of academia. Evidently, the main reason for it is the political and social discrimination of LGBTQ+ individuals in contemporary Russia. However, the Russian LGBTQ+ activists from *Otkrytiye* collective (o-zine.ru) in their podcast *Naraspashku* discuss other reasons for the term being rejected, which is more connected with its unparalleled connection to the Russian language. One of the members of the *Otkrytiye* collective, Nikita Andriyanov, argues that queer has a historical context in the minds of English-speakers, with its dark past, but it does not embody the same effect for a Russian-speaker. Therefore, Andriyanov proposes to use Russian homophobic jargon that would substitute the Western term *queer* and ultimately would make more sense for the Russian public (Andriyanov 16:00-23:00).

For instance, Belarusian queer activist, Andrey Zavaley suggests taking a different approach and implement the Russian pejorative word *pidor* instead of the term *queer* for Russian speakers in his manifesto: *Manifesto Pidora*. Zavaley created the manifesto on May 25, 2018, as a reaction to the attack on Misha Pishchevsky. Pishchevsky was beaten at the exit of the local gay club and died after spending a year and a half in the hospital in Minsk. The fight was provoked by the word *pidor* (Fagot), which is why Zavaley urges queer Russian speakers to use this word, reclaiming its negative connotation. Zavaley states: “I take this word for myself, it belongs to me. It describes my life, my experience. By declaring that I am *Pidor*, I am giving up all privileges that I could have. I urge us to face the truth as a social group, as a community: for the heterosexist majority, we have been and remain filth. Being *Pidor* is about respecting your experience and getting rid of shame. I do not want to wash this dirt away.

This word left a huge mark on my life, which will remain with me forever" (Zavaley). This demonstrates a different approach to the development of queerness in Russia or how queerness could evolve differently in the Russian context in a near future. It is important to fit the narrative of the Russian queer experience in its language and culture with Western queer theory in mind for further development of Russian queer culture.

4.2 Querness in Russian History

Russia is infamous for its current treatment of sexual and gender minorities. The conservative government from *Edinaya Rossiya* promotes Russian traditional values to the public through the introduction of political and social policies, thereby, one may argue that homophobia is embodied in Russian culture and could be considered as one of the Russian traditional values. However, queerness has been a noticeable phenomenon in Russian society throughout history. According to the Russian revisionist historian and creator of the *Uraniya* project, Dmitriy (unknown full name for safety reasons), explains that same-sex relationships were not persecuted in any way. The prominent Russian historian of the 19th century, Sergey Mikhaylovich Solovyov, even revealed that homosexual relationships "were neither in the West or East looked as tolerable as in Russia" (Dmitriy), demonstrating the extent of tolerance towards queerness in the Russian past.

The first sources regarding same-sex relationships in Russia begun to appear during the Middle Ages, although, mostly from the Russian Orthodox Church and from the writings of foreign travelers. The church denounced the *Sin of Sodomy* and was strongly against it. Nevertheless, the minimum punishment was voluntary repentance of sins and fasting or a ban on attending church for a certain period. Simultaneously, other

European regions punished same-sex relationships with treason or the death penalty. The Sweedish diplomat, Peter Petrei de Erlesund (1570 – 1622) served four years as an envoy of the Swedish king in the Tsardom of Russia and published his experience in the anthology, called *The Story of the Grand Duchy of Moscow*, where he stated that "boyars and nobles are often involved in sodomistic sins, men with men, even publicly in front of many people, as if it is an honor to do this without any hesitation" (Petrei). He was outraged by the impunity of this 'sin', but not by the fact of such relationships.

The Western European standards plunged into Russia with the rule of Peter I (1682 – 1725), who adopted the code of laws for military personnel in 1716 to rapidly europeanized the country. The law was enormously influenced by Western Europe and thus by the Catholic Church. However, the punishment for sodomy was corporal in most cases and the death penalty or eternal exile was only imposed in the case of violent non-consensual sexual intercourse. It is important to state that the law applied only in the Russian armed forces, excluding ordinary citizens. Moreover, the punishment later was eased even in the military. In addition, the death penalty in Russia was limited only to punishments for treason in 1744. This led to no executions from 1741 to 1761. On another hand, in the Netherlands, for instance, during this period homosexuals were accused of earthquakes and floods, which led to about 300 executions (Dmitriy). This illustrates that homosexual relationships in Russia were not viewed as a threat to public order, although, they were punished by laws copied from the Western European regions. For this reason, queerness was almost unpunished.

This was the case until 1832 when Nicholas I passed the law against sodomy for all citizens of the Russian Empire. According to Joe Morgan, "a sodomy law was enacted

punishing civilians with ‘birching’ or deportation to Siberia for four to five years to work in the internment camps. This was still less strict than many western neighbors. In comparison, England hanged 55 men for gay sex between 1805 and 1835” (Morgan). Moreover, the queer culture began to rapidly develop with some queer artists emerging, such as Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 – 1893), who according to Morgan was at risk of being jailed for his homosexuality, but the officials turned a blind eye to this fact (Morgan).

Finally, at the beginning of the 20th Century, Russia experienced a social, political, and economic boom, which also greatly impacted the queer culture. The first Russian queer literature was allowed to publish, such as *Wings* (1906) by Mikhail Kuzmin, being the first author in history to describe same-sex relationships in print. Sergei Diaghilev, being openly homosexual conquered Paris with Russian ballet. The royal family of the Romanovs had a number of queer individuals, such as Sergei Alexandrovich and Konstantin Konstantinovich. The Orthodox philosopher, Vasily Rozanov in his treatise, *People of the Moonlight* (1911) called ignorant the legal and medical persecution for homosexuality (Dmitriy). Russian queer rights flourished, considerably impacting the overall outlook of Russian arts.

However, the cultural progress came to an end with the rise of Joseph Stalin (1878 – 1953) in 1928. Any otherness began to be suppressed, including sexual. *On Criminal Responsibility for Sodomy* was adopted in 1933, which equated homosexuality to a crime against the state. Women were excluded from the law, but lesbian relationships were seen as mental disorders and were ‘treated with electroshock therapy and drugs that induced a diabetic coma (Dmitriy). While research on sexuality and gender were taboo in the Soviet

Union, the attitude towards homosexuality changed from homophobic to tolerant in the West, making progress in the research of sexology, genetics, and sociobiology. From this brief history of Russian queerness, it becomes apparent that Russia incorporates a fascinating tradition of queerness throughout its history and therefore homophobia is not one of the Russian traditional values.

4.3 Pioneers

Pre-February Revolution Russia tremendously advanced in arts, enriching the world with various types of avant-garde movements in literature, music, dance, cinema, and visual arts. The queer identity for the majority of pioneer Russian artists was purposely left unnoticeable, which notably suppresses the comprehensive portrait of such individuals and hides the existence of sexual and gender minorities. The revision of queer artists from the past is essential in order to understand their art, as well as inspire upcoming queer creators. When queering Russian visual art history, Konstantin Somov (1869 – 1939) stands out as the first prominent homosexual painter in Russia. Being one of the founders of the *Mir Iskusstva* (World of Art) movement, Somov's sexual identity is rarely mentioned today. His artworks include queer undertones, which could be clearly seen in the series of paintings of Boris Snezhkovsky (Fig. ii) and in the portrait of Mikhail Kuzmin (author of *Wings*) (Fig. i). Notably, these specific artworks had an ultimate influence on the final art project, *The Room of Laughter*.

Fig. i. Konstantin Somov, *Portrait of Mikhail Kuzmin* (Oil on Canvas), 1909
Fig. ii. Konstantin Somov, *The Boxer* (Oil on Canvas), 1933

One may argue that both paintings are examples of Russian queer art, firstly due to the fact that they were created by Konstantin Somov, but also due to the focal figures of the paintings. As mentioned earlier, Mikhail Kuzmin was the first openly homosexual author, who implemented same-sex relationships into his artworks. In the middle of the portrait (Fig. i), a viewer may identify a vividly red or scarlet tie. Somov purposely includes a tie of scarlet tone, as according to the professor of Russian art history, Olga Khoroshilova, red scarves, which were usually used to decorate the back pockets of trousers, as well as red ties, were signs for others that a person is queer (Kosinskaya and Khoroshilova). Therefore, a red tie in Somov's portrait of Kuzmin is not just an accent of color, but also a symbol of the poet's belonging to a homosexual subculture.

Towards the end of his life, Somov began to explore male nudity through his

series of paintings of Boris Snezhkovsky (Fig. ii). Even though the relationship status between Somov and Snezhkovsky is still unknown, the professor of Russian culture and mediator of the Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art, Valeria Strokina suggests that their relationship was perhaps more than just friendship, at least from Somov's side. However, Strokina also points out the current gay-for-pay phenomena in the media and ties it with Somov's series of paintings of Snezhkovsky, concluding that even if the young man was heterosexual, his attitude towards a well-known, in the public, homosexual painter demonstrates a great deal of tolerance, especially taking into account that Snezhkovsky was a professional boxer ("Istoriya Kvir-iskusstva" 11:05-14:23). This demonstrates that homosexuality was bearable for the majority of heterosexuals in Russian metropolitan areas. This delicate portrait of a young boxer also illustrates the contrast between traditional masculinity and queerness.

Sergei Diaghilev's celebrated *Ballets Russes* is yet another example of comprehensive Russian queer culture, which overall shifted Russian arts, as the company engaged a number of queer artists in its production. Diaghilev himself was homosexual. The composer, Nicolas Nabokov once famously said: "He was perhaps the first grand homosexual who asserted himself and was accepted as such by society" (Jennings). Diaghilev's partner, Vaslav Nijinsky (1890 – 1950) moved queer culture in Russia through his art of dance. Nijinsky was arguably the first male ballet star in the world. Strokina states that Nijinsky's body plastic expanded the gender boundaries. It is also important to note the extravagant costumes of Nijinsky, which were quite scandalous for the traditional Russian ballet in the 1900s. His captivating dramatic abilities and atypical costumes created a special image of an androgynous creature for a lucky viewer.

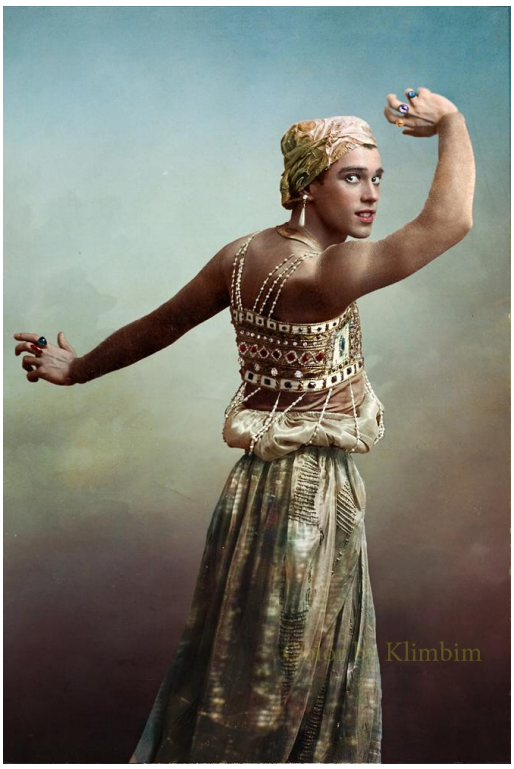

Fig. iii. Vaslav Nijinsky in *Scheherazade* (1910)
Fig. iv. Vaslav Nijinsky in *Le Spectre de la Rose* (1913)

Moreover, Strokina argues that Nijinsky's genderless costumes heavily inspired David Bowie's visual identity ("The History" 16:15-19:20). Nijinsky pushed boundaries in heteronormative structures in ballet, contributing greatly to the development of Russian queer art. Notably, the number of queer-oriented artists during that time frame was tremendous, and the quality of their creations was fairly diverse, which is why it is almost impossible to extensively introduce each of them or even just list them. However, this substantial documentation of these influential Russian queer artists at the beginning of the 20th Century illustrates that same-sex relationships became more acceptable in Russian society.

4.4 Queer Art in Post-Soviet Russia

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 introduced a new chapter for the Russian LGBTQ+ community. The feeling of political freedom was in the air, activating creative Inteligencia. Moreover, homosexuality was fully decriminalized in 1993. The professor of Slavic Languages & Literature, and the author of *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization* (2007), Vitaly Chernetsky recounts the historic event as an "unprecedented renaissance of textual representation and self-representation of possibly the most stigmatized and oppressed minority group in contemporary Russia: gays and lesbians" (Chernetsky 146). Although, the fight for freedom was just at the beginning. Decades of Soviet discrimination of sexual and gender minorities greatly impacted the mindset of the majority of the population, which was unfeasible to change overnight.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that the drastic political, social and economic shift that Soviet citizens experienced in the 90s resulted in an identity crisis for many. The exploration of one's post-Soviet identity was something common between heterosexual cisgender majority and queer minorities. The professor of Russian studies at Kent State University, Brian James Baer analyses the relationship between homosexuality and post-Soviet identity in his book, *Other Russias: Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity* (2009), stating that "the almost complete invisibility of homosexuality in Soviet society—as well as that society's profound sexophobia—has made any discursive deployment of homosexuality there today appear to be, if nothing else, an un-Soviet, and often an aggressively antiSoviet, gesture" (4), which would patently separate the public, with some who would like to move away from the Soviet

past and the others who would like to keep the Soviet boundaries. It is a significant observation in understanding what side the current Russian government has chosen when introducing new social policies.

Nevertheless, three visual artists who evidently designated themselves in the Russian artistic queer scene of that time were Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe (1969 — 2013), Slava Mogutin (b. 1974), and Georgiy Guryanov (1961 – 2013). According to the art critic and senior librarian at Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Valery Ledenev, Mamyshev-Monroe, and his art archive cemented the queer plot in Russian art. He holds rightfully a unique place in the Russian art scene at the end of 1990-2000. His work is an example of queer art in the Russian artistic context, manifesting it through all of his life (Ledenev et al. 285-287). Mamyshev-Monroe is mostly known for transforming himself into celebrities, often as part of a performance, but also at social events, during the opening days of his exhibitions. The first celebrity that the artist transformed into was Marilyn Monroe, which supposedly led as an inspiration for his artistic name. Notably, Mamyshev made this performance when he served in the Soviet army in 1989. His series *The Lives of Wonderful Monroes* has become one of the most iconic in the artist's career. A portrait of the artist in the image of Marilyn Monroe in a dark blue dress against a bright pink background years later can be called the most famous work of Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe (Fig. v). One may argue that the artist, thereby, explored his identity through these various kinds of transformations, investigating himself through the art of drag.

Fig. v. Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe, *Life of Remarkable People* (Photography), 1996
Fig. vi. Slava Mogutin, *Lost Boys. From Russia With Love* (Photography), 2000-2004 (Artwallgallery exhibition in Prague, 2016)

Another Russian queer artist who explores a theme of queer identity is Slava Mogutin. In fact, he is one of the few Russian artists who identify as a queer artist. He mainly works in the medium of photography. Mogutin was quite a scandalous persona due to his past journalistic career. According to Stephen Lucas, "Slava Mogutin fled Russia for New York in 1995. His outspoken writing on gay issues had sparked anonymous death threats, made him the conservative media's favorite whipping boy, and triggered a criminal case that could have resulted in a seven-year prison sentence" (Lucas). Moreover, Mogutin was the first journalist in 'new' Russia who opened a criminal case for journalistic activities. According to Mogutin's interview for New York Magazine, he even attempted to register a first same-sex marriage in Russia in 1993, when he was just 20 years old. Notably, the marriage was approved as the Russian

constitution at that time did not specify genders for a marriage (Miller and Halberstadt 0:55-3:04).

Mogutin shifted his focus on photography once he exiled to New York City. His most notable and critically acclaimed art project was the monographs of photography called, *Lost Boys. From Russia With Love* (2000-2004). The artist depicts how different Russian boys are in a country that battles with its new identity. Mogutin explains, "it's such a cliché to portray Russia as a totally grim and sad place, so I was eager to show a different side of my country that is colorful, exciting, sexy and full of raw energy" (Štefková), illustrating as well how contrasting the Russian contemporary homosexual community is. Striking portraits of boys demonstrate the social decay of the country with on one side a melancholic, but cocky atmosphere. The image of a fighter (Fig. vi) is reminiscent among Russian queer artists, which also can be noticed in the final art project, *The Room of Laughter*.

Notably, Georgy Guryanov (1961 — 2013) was also one of the Russian queer artists, who produced several paintings of fighters. Guryanov was a painter and musician, one of the brightest artists of the art group, *New Artists*. It is important to note that Guryanov was also the drummer and backing vocalist of the iconic Soviet rock band, called *Kino*. According to Kirill Golovastikov, Guryanov linked his life with the underground art world, joining the revolutionary, Timur Novikov. Moreover, he participated in the creation of Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe's *Pirate Television* project, where Guryanov had his own sports column, *Spartacus* (Golovastikov). The sports column *Spartacus* could be viewed as a satire of hyper-masculinity, portaying the 'perfect' image of man. Guryanov purposely appeared half-naked and covered in body oil

to demonstrate his strong physique. However, according to his friend, Alexey Vishnya, *Spartacus* was a purely aesthetic performance. If he was interested in sports, he would not die so early (Golovastikov). The artist was strongly influenced by the erotic gay artworks of *Tom of Finland* in his paintings. Thus, the main subjects of Guryanov's artwork were usually Russian athletes, sailors, and pilots. Georgy Guryanov's queerness could be observed in every aspect of his life, which to some extent impacted his success. Self-portrait of the painter sold for 143 thousand pounds in 2016, making him the most expensive Russian artist over the past decade (Shebetko). This demonstrates the extent of Guryanov's success and contribution to the Russian queer culture and Russian art overall.

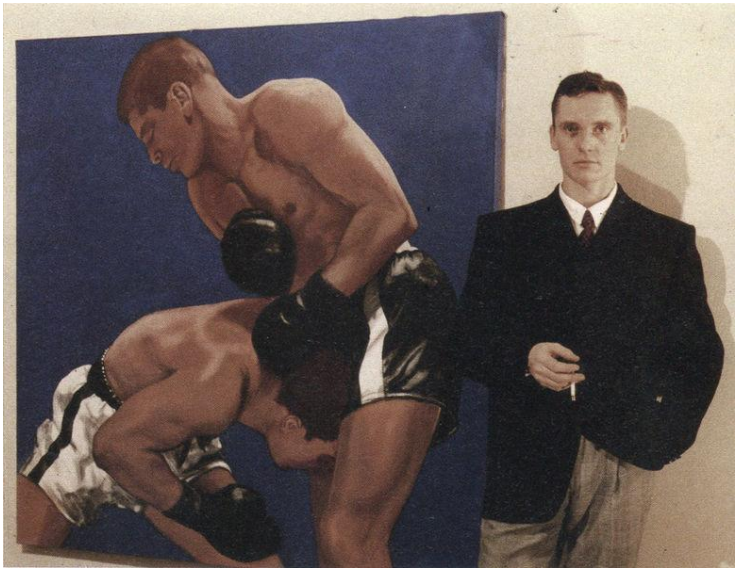

Fig. vii. Georgy Guryanov with his painting, *Boxers*, 1996
Fig. viii. Photo of Evgeny Kozlov, Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe and Georgy Guryanov in Leningrad, 1989

4.5 Censorship & Activism

The contemporary period of Russian queer art could be described as *Censorship & Activism*, the period which is parallel to the ongoing consolidation of power of

Vladimir Putin and his political party, *Edinaya Rossiya*. Even though censorship was limited at the beginning of the 21st Century in Russia, the rise of activism towards LGBTQ+ visibility and rights exponentially grew in the country. In fact, one may argue that creating art with a queer message can already be called activism, as it promotes visibility of such sexual and gender minorities, as well as educates the heterosexual majority of their existence, eventually leading to a more tolerable society.

Consequently, the Russian art movement, called *Monstration*, was born during this period of time, which ties perfectly with the meaning of censorship and activism in Putin's Russia. According to Ledenev, *Monstration* is a mass artistic demonstration with slogans and banners, and as a rule, they should contain absurd content. The first *Monstration* was held in Novosibirsk by the *Contemporary Art Terrorism* (CAT) group in 2004, bringing together about 80 participants. Subsequently, members of the group Babushka *After the Funeral* (BPP) as well as the Novosibirsk artist Artem Loskutov began to organize the Novosibirsk Monstrations. Although the *Monstrations* are excluded directly from the practices of the queer movement, they can be described in the logic of *travesty* proposed by Judith Butler (Ledenev et al. 292). For the most part, the content of the banners is extremely absurd and apolitical, but their meaning may be dubious in some cases, and therefore, the police still arrest the monstartors. This indirectly proves the fact that any non-conformity looks like a signal of danger in the eyes of the authorities.

Fig. ix. *Monstration* in Novosibirsk (2012) (The main sign translates as *We Are You*)

Another art movement that is worth mentioning in understanding the Russian contemporary queer art is *Actionism*. Even though it was born in Western Europe and the United States in the 1960s, the art movement was popularised in Russia only after the collapse of the Soviet Union, forming into a new wave, called *Moscow Actionism*. Member of the Moscow Actionism movement of the 90s, a researcher of Actionism and art critic, Pavel Mitenko explains that Actionism is asocial, but sometimes actionists overstep the line - summarizing the balance of forces of society, the state, political and economic groups. However, actionists do it by proclaiming something more important. By their actions, they assert the value of politics, which calls into question norms and laws in a specific state. *Moscow Actionism* is characterized by radicalism and provocation. Artists may use nudity, blood, intercourse scenes, and riot the streets,

provoking the public to act or discuss the issue (Mitenko). The music band, t.A.T.u. and their performances could be attributed to actionsim. Liza Otarashvili argues that for Russia in the early 2000s, t.A.T.u.'s kiss was the first and last statement to the whole world about how it is to love freely. Indeed, Madonna's and Britney Spears's iconic kiss took inspiration from t.A.T.u. What was possible in Russia then would be impossible to imagine today (Otarashvili). t.A.T.u. normalized the image of same-sex relationships in popular culture not just in Russia, but around the world. Although Lena Katina and Julia Volkova (members of t.A.T.u.) are heterosexual, their art strongly contributed to the Russian queer culture.

The art group, *The Blue Noses* was founded by Sasha Shaburov and Slava Mizin in 1999, and their art practice is reminiscent of Actionism. The artistic duo caused scandals, which is why Mizin and Shaburov jokingly call themselves the most forbidden artists of Russia. One of these 'scandalous' artworks is photography under the title, *The Era of Mercy* (Fig. x). The photo attracted public attention after the ban on participation in the Paris exhibition of Sots Art in October 2007. The Minister of Russian Culture during that time, Alexander Sokolov, called *Era of Mercy* pornographic and stated that it is a shame for the whole of Russia ("Aleksandr Shaburov"). Ironically, this particular artwork made the *Blue Noses* known in the West due to the fact of its censorship from the Russian authorities.

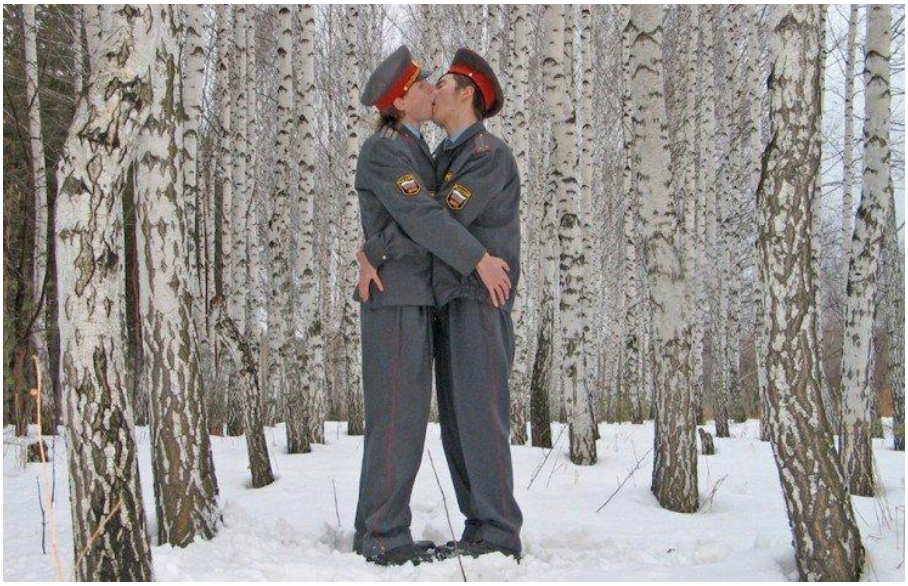

Fig. x. Blue Noses, *Era of Mercy* (Photography), 2004

However, it is important to note that Sasha Shaburov and Slava Mizin are excluding themselves from the LGBTQ+ activism. Shaburov once commented on the artwork by stating: "This is not pornography, but a dream about the impossible, about the time when even the police could stop using truncheons and start treating everyone with love. Our works are not 'political caricatures', but there are visual metaphors of the time we live in" (Yakovlenko). Nevertheless, *Era of Mercy* cumulated scandal, which reflects what kind of society it was made for.

Perhaps, the most well-known Russian art groups of the *Moscow Actionism* era are *Voina* and *Pussy Riot*. Formed in 2007, *Voina's* main contributors were Oleg Vorotnikov, Natalia Sokol, Peter Verzilov, and lastly, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, who later also co-founded Pussy Riot with Maria Alyokhina. Russian sociologist of culture and author of *Total 'Voina.' Art Activism in the Era of Tandem Democracy*, Alek D. Epstein argues that *Voina* played a historical role in Russian contemporary art, marking the birth of political actionism in Russia. The art groups were going against privileges, bribes, an

unjust court system, Putin, against everything evil (Babitskaya). However, both art groups were also fighting for the rights of the Russian LGBTQ+ community with their artworks. Voina, dor instance has joined the campaign in support of Russian Gay Pride by releasing a series of banners featuring the 2011 Moscow Pride and their artwork called, *Lobzay Musora* (Kiss the Pig), where female Voina artists were kissing policewomen in Moscow underground (Fig. xi).

Fig. xi. Voina, *Lobzay Musora* (Video), 2011

4.6 The Current State

The anti-queer sentiment by the Russian authorities, ironically, sparkled the rapid development of queer culture in the country, which could be compared to the times of pre-revolutionary Russia. One may argue that this queer revolution is currently happening due to the rise of social media. In recent years, more cultural places were turned into queer safe zones, such as techno parties organized by *Popoff Kitchen* and *LVBZ*.

Moreover, the 'trendiest' bars and clubs in Moscow and St. Petersburg, like *Raduga*, *Mutabor*, etc. brand themselves as pro-queer on their social media. New online media platforms, such as *Otkrytiye* (o-zine.ru) gain massive social media presence, educating the Russian public about the queer communities through articles, podcasts, and interviews. It is important to note the importance of YouTube, where Russian queer creators become celebrities. Karen Shainyan's YouTube channel, *Straight Talk with Gay People* culminates a high number of views with his interviews of prominent queer individuals from the Russian society.

Instagram, furthermore, offered visibility to the underground Russian queer art community, who are getting further acceptance from the Russian heterosexuals. Currently, the most noticeable Instagram accounts that spread information about Russian queer art are the *Russian Queer Revolution* (@russian.queer.revolution) and *Tetki* (@izvestnye_tetki). *Russian Queer Revolution* art platform started by the writer and curator, Anastasiia Fedorova (@anastasiia_fedorova), who stated in an I-D magazine interview: "One of the best things about the internet is that queer people can learn about each other's experiences, no matter where they are. One of my main goals is simply to connect Russian queer creatives to a wider global context. The mainstream media outlets react to this change and start to showcase these particular artists on their platforms" (Seward). The main objective of the platform is to depict that being queer in Russia "is not just pain – but also a great deal of beauty, joy, pleasure, pride, creativity, and talent" (Fedorova). The platforms like Fedovoa's demonstrate the extent of diversity of the contemporary Russian queer art scene and its importance on overall Russian culture. Suddenly, homophobia is not 'cool' anymore in Russian urban areas. However, queerness

is still misunderstood, unrepresented, and silenced, but at least now it is often met with curiosity and not abuse.

Fig. xii. *Russian Queer Revolution* exhibtion in London, 2020

Chapter 5

The Room of Laughter

5.1 Concept

The Room of Laughter is the main title for my diploma art project, which seeks its inspiration and influences through queering of the Russian culture. Moreover, the series of artworks, *The Room of Laughter* depict my search for a personal identity, where I investigate the complexity of my queerness through my ethnicity, language, customs, and

culture. I have always been inspired by human perception of ourselves and how contrasts it may be for each individual. I would like to explore the perception of myself through distorted mirrors that can often be found in a house of mirrors. Notably, the literal translation of house of mirrors in Russian is *The Room of Laughter*. Ironically, we come to the house of mirrors to laugh at ourselves, the place that portrays *odd* or *unconventional* reflections of ourselves, which may be funny for some. In fact, queerness and queers are often laughed at. The iconic drag queen, Bob The Drag Queen exceptionally explained the phenomena in her interview with Naomi Smalls: "When you walk into a room, people are just laughing at your queerness. They think that your queerness, meaning your existence in and of itself is a joke" ("Bob The Drag" 12:26-12:49), which deeply moved me due to personal memories of similar uncomfortable experiences. I began to realize in childhood that being myself is *odd* and *funny* for the majority. Therefore, a viewer may see *funny* and *distorted* images of myself that were studied through the mirrors from *The Room of Laughter.*

Growing up in Karaganda, I used to like visiting with my brother and nanny the local house of mirrors in a central park. The small decaying building of Soviet-era included one big hallway with various kinds of distorted mirrors. I could stay there for a long period of time, walking around the room and observe *odd* reflections of myself. The light reflections, metaphysical shapes of my deformed face and body were the opposite of funny, they were terrifying and fascinating. In this context, laughter has a darker side. Indeed, the combination of comic and tragic or tragicomedy is reminiscent in Russian culture. The rhetorical question: "Should I cry or laugh?" is a common reply for a Russian when one hears an absurd or frantic story, as preposterous situations are quite

common in Russian society. Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote in *Brothers Karamazov*: "Russian quite often laughs where it is necessary to cry" ("Brat'ya Karamazovy"). The laughable depiction of deformed bodies in *The Room of Laughter* convey a melancholic and tragic tone, reflecting struggles of acceptance in our *odd* society.

Investigating the Russian queer artists, one subject matter always prevails. Artists, such as Konstantin Somov, Slava Mogutin, and Georgy Guryanov depicted fighters in their artworks. One may argue that the reason for such creations was to some extent demonstrate the beauty of male physique, but perhaps, a fighter also symbolyses the Russian queer community. The fight for your own survival in a society that ultimately creates barriers for your failure. Thus, the main subject in the painting, *Fighter* from the series *The Room of Laughter* sought its inspiration in this ongoing tradition of the depiction of male fighters.

Fig. xiii. Sasha Vitov (Alexandr Melnikov), *Fighter*, (Oil on Canvas), 2021

5.2 Goluboy

The color palette for the whole series of paintings and installations is intentionally kept between blue and red undertones, as both colors are embodied in the Russian queer culture. As mentioned earlier, in pre-revolutionary Russia, ties or napkins of the scarlet tone of red (*aliy*) was a hidden sign for others that this particular individual is homosexual. Furthermore, the neon red is often implemented at underground techno rave events that are a commonly safe zone for the LGBTQ+ community, as they were first created by marginalized black queer communities in the US. The red color symbolizes the sexual energy of these particular events. The techno rave culture ultimately impacts the final art project with paintings such as *One Long Night* and *One Night After*.

Fig. xvi. Sasha Vitov (Alexandr Melnikov), *One Long Night*, (Oil on Canvas), 2020

Fig. xvii. Sasha Vitov (Alexandr Melnikov), *One Night After*, (Oil on Canvas), 2021

Blue color for Russian speakers is divided into two distinctive colors: *goluboy* (light blue) and *siniy* (dark blue). In addition, *goluboy* means *gay* in Russian. Therefore, the light blue color is presented in every artwork of *The Room of Laughter*. The contrast between bright red and light blue convey the struggles of being queer, as on one hand the lives of queers are full of beauty, love, passion, joy, and on another, it may come with melancholy and psychological traumas due to misunderstanding, ignorance, and censorship from the cis-gender heterosexual majority. Nevertheless, the struggles presented in *The Room of Laughter* are not viewed as an issue or miss fortune, but rather a blessing, as it is a story about becoming comfortable with who you are, accepting yourself fully. Even though the start of the journey might be troubling, the end result of finding the inner self is rewording. The challenges faced at the beginning of self-exploration are to some extent needed to start reflecting, learning, and accepting, as, by the end of this long journey, I am the one who is laughing.

Fig. xviii. Sasha Vitov (Alexandr Melnikov), *Selfie with a Funny Mirror*, 2021

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