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Russian Red and Prussian Blue

The author of "Russian Red" Yury Vasiliev is a Russian middle-aged man, robust, bearded, with slightly wild-looking light eyes. As the fate willed he lives in Kaliningard-Koenigsberg, former Eastern Prussia, and works in the sphere of "actual art", well known as a phenomenon of the international scope.

Initially Vasiliev is a painter, graphic artist and designer. Having gone through the profound phase of abstract art, painting and experiments with various materials, he now works with digital and video camera, develops conceptual projects. The largest of them is "Russian Red", an unaccomplished one, transforming in time and space. The "Russian Red" idea, just being outlined, acquires new unknown facets with every following stage of the artist's exhibiting activities. The idea began to unfold literally from the inside of the capacious word found by the artist in reply to the similarly laconic and intriguing word contoured by the curators of the exhibition in Potsdam, where to in 2001 Vasiliev was invited as an interesting Russian artist from the former Königsberg. This word - "Prussian Blue" is aptly rhymed to "Russian Red".

"Prussian Blue" was the name of a large exhibition and curators program devoted to the anniversary of the Duke Fridrich I coronation as the first Prussian king in Königsberg in 1701.

The word about the Russian came to the artist's mind not without reason, in a remote Russian region, which in a sense Kaliningrad is, where natives from all the corners of Russia live the Russian way in the shade of the Motherland-statue's bronze shawl. This word was initiated from the outside, although one could have expected its appearance from the inside.

The red color, initially nameless, simply red color has emerged in Vasiliev's work before, and not being specifically Russian it used to be the symbol of a striking gesture, modernistic art, and avant-gardism in general.

In a birch wood, somewhere near Kostroma, the artist has painted white tree-trunks red. He painted with gouache to several meters height. What he acquired was a strange, absurd red birch grove. The trunks were painted only from one side, because it was intended not for a visitor of the 'wood exhibition', but for shooting a video view of the strange landscape to work further with the image. However, there came uninvited and casual visitors – the mushroomers. It's interesting what they were thinking about wandering among the red trunks, for sure not about the Russian and certainly not about the actual art, which is simply unfamiliar to common people. Most likely thoughts about biological and ecological experiments of scientists crossed their mind.

On the monitor screen we can see the birches gradually turning red to the sound of a disquieting bell. The red flares up and becomes most intensive. On the basis of this image a large rectangular banner was ordered and a postcard with the scarlet background and the inscription “Russian Red” was issued. Let’s at once admit that not only for the Germans and the international audience, but in general “Russian Red” is only implied, and still it is written “Russian Red” in the international English. In the broad context of Vasiliev’s developing project the red is, strictly speaking, not ‘ruscky krasny’ (‘Russian Red ’), but exactly “Russian Red”, that is the thematized color taken as the American-English slogan about the Russian, Russia with all its oddities.

The exhibition name introduced by the Germans in honor of the coronation anniversary wasn’t thought as provocative, inciting to an outcry of national paroles. Since “Prussian” is not a nationality, “Prussian Blue” is in its turn something very abstract and ulterior, safely hidden in its sense. Prussia has not existed as a state since 1918 and it ceased existing as a cultural phenomenon during the XXth century. However, there remained some recollections, traces, material culture and, perhaps, the main thing is that the space, nature and topography still remember Prussia. But anyway, “Prussian Blue” sounds this day, above all, aesthetically, beautifully, but absolutely abstract. Poetical, almost vulgar.

The 2001 exhibition name, to which Vasiliev reacted aptly and at the same time provocatively, claimed to easiness and universality. After all, light blue, blue

is associated nowadays not with the military uniform, not with cloth color, but with the sky, summer, jeans, sea, etc.

The exhibition took place in idyllic Potsdam gardens close to San-Soosi Palace. The contemporary artists' works were displayed in the conservatory. It was built at the end of the XVIIIth century and is famous for its Palm hall with Egyptian motives. That's where Vasiliev's red birches found themselves. Artists from different countries were invited to participate in the exhibition, but first of all from those countries, which used to be under the Prussian crown during the XVIII-XXth centuries, and it goes without saying, from the former Kaliningrad-Koenigsberg - the city of the coronation.

As it was already mentioned, "Prussian blue" sounds summery, optimistically open and doesn't associate with hard problems of history, national consciousness, etc. Today the Russians also may hear some specific playfulness. However, only such an excessively versed person like the author of these very lines can surmise if there is a hint at 'progressive' and 'stylish' homosexuality in the higher circles of Prussian officers, or at Fridrich the Great himself.

At the beginning of the XXIst century "Prussian Blue" is no longer capable of making us feel the proximity of 'iron and blood', by means of which Bismark united Germany in the XIXth century. Hardly anyone except historians and veterans can recollect the 'iron cross', all the more the white cloak of the German Medieval Order, on hearing these words. Nevertheless the Russian artist from the former Koenigsberg had heard a challenge parole in the exhibition name and gave his response to it arousing those meanings, which used to sleep peacefully in the haze of Prussian Blue.

For today Vasiliev's project consists of several parts. The first one is the birches in San-Soosi conservatory. The Russian red image came up to Vasiliev's mind while working with the birches in the wood and, undoubtedly, against the background of the nature and cultural space of Eastern Prussia, where the artist lives. At the same time it's impossible to imagine that the artist would like to paint Prussian oaks or beeches, though the latter is right for this owing to its trunk smoothness. These trees are too massive and completely defined. Violence towards them would be senseless and doomed to failure. Russian Red can't burst into Prussia without revealing its absurdity and estrangement. The birches in mid-Russia are another matter. Owing exactly to their undisguised defenselessness they challenge the Russian soul and hand to the dashing action, magic orgy violence. And the most essential is that the birch accepts it, doesn't look either

absurd or strange, and turns into the Russian symbol merging with the environment. Russian birch is the favorite symbol of the Motherland, especially in the Middle Russia.

However, if we honor Theodore Fontane, an outstanding German realist writer of the XIXth century, the singer of Brandenburg and Prussia, then the symbol of this country is also the birch. Not the oak referring to the heroic antiquity, but the small birch inseparable from the local unpretentious coloring. Though, it doesn't resemble its Russian sister, it is not as white, smooth and beautiful as our birch-maiden. The artist brought the red color and the red paint into the birch-grove environment, the embodiment of purity and tranquility, of coolness and quietness, of virginity.

On Vasiliev's video the white birches come out of the white winter cold background. Red appears as blood, as fire, still forming not a dissonance together with the birches, but a steady emblematical pair of white and red. Russian birch can be imagined without greenery, right without greenery like white and black, like light silvery wood, clinking and cleavable, blazing especially hot in stove. It seems as if created for the transition into scarlet heat. This orgy side of the phenomenon doesn't coincide with the lyrical side embodied in the feminine grove, alley, weeping and cemetery birch-maidens and birch-old-women. The birch greenery itself, the birch-rod is reminiscent of heat, bath-house and orgy. There are similar features in German folk culture, but they are not manifested as physically perceptible as in our culture, where the birch is inseparable from the bath-house and fire. However, 'white Sunday', the first day-off since Easter, is not just the day of anointing, snow-white dresses and birch branches in a church. Frequently it is May 1 that is the day of Walpurgis Night, the witches' Sabbath. During these days in Germany they install May trees and huge poles decorated with ribbons in villages and city market squares, young men present young women with the 'maien', the miniature birches in the token of love. But nowhere except Slavonic world, to which the Sorbs inhabiting Prussian Brandenburg relate, there is a special loving-and-violent attitude to the birch, when it is bent and broken on Whitsunday, when they cut its bark and torture it in every way.

If the first Vasiliev's Russian Red image with the birches cannot help being perceived as a violent-festive one, then the second one distinguishes itself by airiness and lightness. It appeared while the project was continued in Vienna Museum of Applied Art and was also displayed in Berlin (inside the red-brick building of the former post station). This installation is based on the video-still.

One day Vasiliev together with his friends drove out to the seaside dunes. It was the famous Curonian spit, the favorite spot of Kaliningrad artists for creative work and recreation. A few people formed up a rank along the costal dune edge raising the starling-boxes high above themselves. It resulted in a simple and expressive image – a rectangle of the pale-blue sky above, a strip of sand below, a string of the balancing in the wind light figures in the parti-colored costumes and the red starling-boxes, as if ready to accept the birds, which are, though, nowhere to be seen. Again the banner and the postcard of the same design as the one with the birches consisting of two parts were produced with the red rectangle and the “Russian Red” inscription. The motif of a starling-box, migratory birds, small house without any occupants emerged in connection with the fact that many artists, not only from Kaliningrad, are attracted to the spit by the so-called ‘bird station’, or the Birds Migration Research Institute of the Academy of Sciences.

Birds fly over the spit, scientists catch them into nets, ring them and set them free. In Vasiliev’s work birds or just light and air are caught by means of the starling-boxes that are small houses, red houses. The theme of a house, its inhabitants and settledness in general, and also of property, can emerge in mind of those who will correlate signals about the Russian and migratory birds with the image of the ready to fly up light figures. They have some groundlessness, a hint at Malevich’s ‘weightlessness’. They are carefree. They hover in the space. At the same time they are the true inhabitants of this strange land – the spit, the Kaliningrad region, a piece of land between the heaven and the earth, between normal countries and nations, an enclave and at the same time the model and the concentrated expression of Russia vaguely locked up between times and systems. By means of the Russian Red small houses Kaliningrad young dwellers catch the Baltic air and light that has belonged to them for a long time, but a doubt doesn’t leave in peace: the Prussian blue sky has stretched over the Russian red starling-boxes.

Within the frameworks of the installation in Vienna and Berlin there were placed two video-projections, two-meter squares, contiguous to each other as if forming a double mirror-book, in the dark room near the banner in the corner. Against the red background a spectator sees a slightly vibrating dark, almost black circle that is the starling-box hole shot close-up. The image itself, if we divert from the video-technique, reminds of abstract art, Rothko and Malevich. Simultaneously it is a corner relief alike Tatlin created and a diptych, an icon in the red corner. Nowadays Malevich’s black square or red circle have become the major symbols of “Russian Red” and Russia’s contribution to the world culture.

Very few people in Russia agree with this opinion and a lot of the Russians still don't know that the black square is the same symbol of Russia as the tsar-cannon and matreshka-doll. Art-critics consider some avant-guard artworks such as the 'square' and Tatlin's counter-reliefs as the symbols of the century end and at the same time the new beginning of art, the end of one ungenue Russian artistic identity (realism) and the beginning of another, profound and true, going back to the ancient roots, to the identity of the metaphysical, mythical and at the same time revolutionary-experimental nature.

Of course, Vasiliev's diptych can be interpreted in various ways. For instance, we look into the dark depth of a Russian house, look right into the black pupil of a Russian eye and... find nothing there, don't find the concrete, but we find everything inside ourselves, in the darkness of the deaf feeling. The diptych resembles two eyes, two black dynamics and reminds me of the village cuckoo-clock, an uncomplicated and hypnotic thing alike many other Russian things. The black circles compel to wait patiently till something appears from the inside, comes out to the light of the definiteness. But what appears is the same or - nothing.

If we ponder in another way, then the two house-starling-boxes' holes facing each other are a trap. The example of great notorious avant-guard with its polysemantics, primitivism and archness plays the role of an idee fixe, a temptation. The national idea inseparable from modernism in Russia also works as a trap. Come on, jump into the house, become a guaranteed image, a detail of the uncomplicated machine – this will provide the status of the Russian and the artistic. This cuckoo of Russian art still cuckoos its perpetual song. But most important remains the red, its heat and authenticity. Let alone the cuckooing, the heat of unconsciousness is real! That's what saves from both reiteration monotony and uncertainty, aimlessness of efforts in search of identity.

The third part of the red project is represented by the black-and-white video. Two figures shown in a realistic everyday environment of some village constitute its motif. They are an old woman and a man, who is constantly calling, shouting and mooing like a calf: "Mom! Mummy! Ma! Momm! Maa! ", and so on. Nothing else is happening, only these two figures flounder about and the son's heart-rending voice is heard. There is the banner with the red rectangle and the well-known inscription "Russian Red" near the video-installation. This video is expressive, it quite strongly gets on one's nerves. Either drunk or semi-ill overgrown son dully torments his mother and himself. They are an inseparable

pair – the man is always with his mother, still snatches her skirt and cannot get back on his feet. He cries, calls, and rends one’s heart. It seems he has been cast off, but it’s out of the question, it seems he needs something, but he doesn’t, it seems something hurts him, but nothing does, it seems a danger approaches from the outside, but there is no danger. Pain, danger, fear, loneliness are all inside, everything is groundless, aimless, and it comes from tearfulness, swaddleness and nonage. “Mom, leave me alone, set me free, turn me out to hell, the hell with you, mom!” rushes like waves of red, waves of blood, not allowing to see anything around oneself.

The fourth part of the project was realized within the frameworks of “Contemporary art in traditional museum” festival in summer, 2002 in St Petersburg (Pro Arte Institute). Vasiliev’s installation was exhibited in the house-museum studio of the popular Russian landscape painter A.I. Kuindgi. The site was offered by the “Pro Arte” curators. Since the motif of the white birch and the Motherland is considerably notable in Kuindgi’s creative work, this place was chosen, the cosy and at the same time exposed to the sun and wind studio rising high above the Neva.

In the sitting-room Vasiliev installed a monitor. The bright blue screen was seen right from the entrance and contrasted sharply with the middle-class furnishing of the XIXth century apartment. Man’s hands, knees and blue jeans are on the screen. He is twirling a blade of the dangerous razor, opening and closing it, as if demonstrating, not without gloomy significance. Self-murderer? Killer? Or just a dubious vulgar fellow from a crime film of Nevzorov style? The motif evokes not only criminal, but also castration and suicide associations. All this doesn’t anyhow harmonize with the cosy traditional house-museum of the artist, who was neither a radical, nor a neurasthenic, nor a suicide like, for instance, Van Gogh was.

In the studio Vasiliev showed the famous video with the birches and hung his banner on the wall above Kuindgi’s couch covered with the dark red oriental carpet. For some reason the couch at once turned from a simple sofa into Sigmund Freud’s couch and began to hint at the theme of the subconscious, complexes, etc. The bloody birches harmonized well in their coloring with the furniture of Arhip Ivanovich, with the bouquet of red carnations on the wardrobe brought there by the museum staff members. Vasiliev detached the space with the furniture and the banner by means of a red-and-white plastic ribbon like in a museum, but also like on hunting or ski-races. The banner was taken as the intrusion of the advertising

plastic contemporaneity, simply as the advertising “Russian Red” pause. One could only ask oneself a question what is, strictly speaking, advertised – a dyestuff, a detergent, Russian forest or some photo-wall-paper.

In the other part of the studio the artist put on the floor in a rectangular form twelve large photos in the glassed-in black frames. In this dark, heavy rectangle on the floor reflected the big window of the top light on the studio ceiling. Behind the window-pane there stretched the dark Neva and grew pale the Petersburg sky. In the artist’s photos taken by means of the digital camera an attentive spectator could recognize the razor blade, the hands, the eye and other details, which he had already seen on the monitor screen in different color and scale. These are the artist’s hands. On the whole the photos make kind of brutal impression. They are very fleshy and at the same time cold and perfect, one might say absolutely soulless and at the same time shine with gloomy passionateness. Their coloring is built on the combinations of silvery reflexes of thick steel, deep blue, green and brown. Within St Petersburg environment these hues could be interpreted as pseudo-Dostoyevsky intonations. This time “Russian Red” looked like a distinctively aggressive and typically senseless intrusion of the element.

In St Petersburg it turned out particularly interesting that in the festival program there was one more project based on the symbolism and expression of the red color. It was the “Red Convent” by the Moscow artist-actionist Elena Kovylyna. Outwardly her project was represented as a social and philanthropic one. During several months the artist and her female friends clothed in red dresses, stockings, kerchiefs, wearing emphasized scarlet lipstick, visited hospitals, almshouses, asylums, needy families and...gave out money received on the project realization from the PRO ARTE Institute. Naturally, all these actions were filmed and shot. The exposition was prepared for the festival opening in Lenin House-Museum, where the Public Movements Museum branch had been lodged. The exposition subject was the history of charity in St Petersburg in the XIXth – the beginning of the XXth century. Advertisingly bright clothes of the charity women, their rubicund satisfied appearance, the sly inclusion of those who were given the charity into the framework of the “art” alien to them, in particular the art of grant-grabbing and quite sly, selfish grant-realization, - all this turned the festive optimistic red into the color of obsession, of unconscious and irresponsible activity. Despite and in spite of the superficial flirtations with the left symbolics, Kovylyna got glamour-self-complacent and sly, victoriously feminine red color. It just emphasized the heavy, inward ‘hue’ of red in Vasiliev’s work. On the other hand, exactly Kovylyna’s journal red appeared as the sought by the West synthesis of the national and the left in Russian red, in Russian

ineradicable carnival-matreshka tradition.

One of the “Russian Red” project’s underlying ideas is also connected with the motif of red fabric, red printed cotton. It is not accidental in the context of Russian thematics, the evidence of which are Maliavin’s folk dancers, Soviet weavers and the workers’ faculty students in red kerchiefs. According to the author’s plan the video depicts the process of measuring off the scarlet printed cotton or red fabric. The fabric is being laid in large folds, is piled in front of the camera. This motif is compared to another one – the motif of the countless faces of passers-by, of appearing and disappearing people, the masses. The moving folds, running meters of fabric, incessantly flowing time, impersonal mass of people, generations, waves of blood, waves of ensigns and clothes, waves of one and the same, where its impossible to reveal any differences forming the surf and pulsating of Russian red, of the Russian, are to be compared with individual faces, fleeting sparks of not red, of the different in respect to its element.

Some other not yet realized by the artist concepts relate to the “Russian Red” project. One of them is directly connected with the advertising, to which preponderance in Russia the reaction is sharp and not that simple. Many artists fall into advertising or reflect upon it. Sometimes they do it simultaneously. An example is Kovylyina’s advertising of the grant charity. In the West they sometimes say that the Russians rushed as if into their element into advertising, which had been hidden from them for so long. In Russia they say that the Russians produce very bad “not beautiful” advertisement. The Russians are not susceptible to advertisement, - other Russians say. The Russians despise advertisement. All the Russians deal with nothing but advertising and self-advertising, which doesn’t correspond to the actual quality of the product. Within the advertising the Russians have become normal people or right in their advertising they have reproduced their initial streaks. Such statements are also pronounced. Before Russian art critique liked to emphasize that Russian art never used to be advertising in comparison with the western one, for instance Catholic. But, no doubt, in its popular, mass sphere it always used to be touting and variegated, of the placard and popular wood-cut nature. That is how many different torments one can enumerate in connection with advertising. They say and not without reason that advertising has colored the surface of our life, that it “re-colors” us arousing our false and unnecessary needs, not genuine and not primary. The dispute about the genuine in Russia is very hard because of the artistic and amusing nature of all Russian phenomena. Are Maliavin women’s

sarafans authentic? Aren't they a temptation? For the Russian it's difficult to fix on something, to make choice, - only if this choice is not strictly ascetic or strictly orgy, red.

Within the frameworks of the "Russian Red" project Vasiliev wants to create a plot connected with the advertisement of the cats' feed called "Whiskas". "Whiskas" color is to be applied to the banner, apparently not the "Russian Red" color, - less sonorous, less bright, sort of not so defined, but inwardly very defined in its expansion.

Another project idea, seems to me one of the latest, openly introduces the theme of national animals and repainting, the theme, which was indirectly touched in the "Whiskas" plot, the theme of red piglet. Russian symbolism in the person of Petrov-Vodkin brought out the red horse to the scene, Russian C zannism of the revolutionary avant-gardism period – Falk red chairs. Horses are not in fashion nowadays. This noble animal bound itself up with the conservative painting and sculpture of the past. On the contemporaneity proscenium is the sheep, the pig, which are successfully ousted by bacteria. The piglet, painted like an Easter egg, is figuring in Vasiliev's work. Still it hasn't become "different", red, - it has only been painted. Here the artist doesn't enter the sphere of nature transformations, with which bio-art and genome engineering deal. The strange and somewhat foolish action, painting the piglet, ironically thematizes an extra-religious Holiday, ritual or buffoonery, so to say ideological raving, starting with the political re-coloring into red and ending with the artistic experiments with nature, which are not capable of changing anything in the nature since they deal only with the surface, with the aesthetics. The bloody red piglet daubed with gouache, - whatever it is, in any case the subject of violence and absurd constituent of Russian origin are concerned. The piglet is painted and washed, it is laughed at and at the same time it is turned into something sacredly strange, into a sacrifice possessed by and familiar with the higher energy.

Generally the piglet and the pig don't occupy considerable place in the symbolic pantheon of the Russianness, and the pig for us is the negative symbol of bottom, dust, stupidity and harm. Of course, a roast pig seasoned with the horse-radish may appear on a Russian festive table, but rather in a novel, it is a purely literary image not without some ironical shade. Nowadays only an occasional Russian can boast of ever eating the roast pig. It is completely different matter in the sphere of "Prussian Blue", in West-European culture, for the Germans, in whose language pig means happiness, wealth and joy. Everyone

knows German money-boxes in the form of the pig and New Year postcards with the jolly pink piglets. Even the expression “drunk as a swine” (dead-drunk in Russian) in the German language doesn’t mean dirt or, strictly speaking, “schwein” and means that a drunken man is stupid and self-satisfied like a swine. Certainly, the Germans associate the pig with blood-shedding, and the expression “to bleed as a swine” means “to be in flood of blood”, but there is not any absurdity in this idiom.

The white piglet painted red on Vasiliev’s video first of all signifies the festively violent action. It signifies the aggressiveness of the red, which is initially not characteristic of the piglet. Russian piglet is white and pink. The transformation of the edible piglet into the inedible ideological symbol, that’s how it is possible to define the semantic tendency of the artist’s idea. Right here the inedibleness, un-organicness of Russian red is clearly revealed. This red is not at all the color of blossomed flesh, nor the hedonistic value.

Vasiliev showed the project fragment, the photos with the blade, once more within the context of the plain-air review exhibition “Inside and between: communication and identification” in Kaliningrad in the summer of the same 2002 year. The motives of birds, animals, and body, biology and life in general were dominating. There were the famous man-dog Kulik, and the main bio-art specialist Dmitry Bulatov and other artists interested in the problem of biological, vital.

The location of human being, art and natural life itself in the world was the subject of my talk at this plain-air.

What is natural? What is artificial? Where are the boundaries, which can not be crossed, but for some reason life itself tends to cross its own boundaries? What does it mean to be inside, inside oneself, inside life, inside art? What is the sense of migrations, free flying and Brown movement?

Against the background of these questions and feelings Vasiliev’s photos with their threatening expressiveness and somewhat surreal plasticity of turning out the internal outside and withdrawing of the external inside looked like the picture of the unpleasant balancing on the verge of life and death, the allowed and the forbidden, somewhere between murder and operation, art, gamble and crime. The steel shine, feeling of body nearness, coldness and dampness, threat of perversion and amalgam of technique and vital motives well convey the intermediateness as the subject (“inside and between”) set by the curators. It also relates to the topos of the Russian eternally obtained somewhere between.

The blade of German prewar razor is figuring in the photos and on the video. Its design is perfect. Smoothness and accuracy characterize this almost Egyptian in its refinement style, the style of the epoch after Bauhaus, Werkbund and Art Deco. The lines are ornamental and arouse associations with a bird. Bird and knife are concepts, which have been interconnected from the earliest times, they are mutually negating each other and at the same time they are transitional: the stroke of a knife is as quick and light as the flap of a wing; the razor-knife and the bird throat, the human throat strive after each other. The razor-bird is, of course, also “Russian Red” since threat, blood and murder are not hidden but openly revealed in red. The words “to slaughter”, “to slash” and today’s rude “to bump off” are visually unthinkable without red.

In Kaliningrad the photos were shown without the slogan about the Russian, and nevertheless, the plain-air context itself and the subject of identity made one recollect this theme. The Kaliningrad region artists are constantly facing the hard problem of the “metropolis” to which their creative work is related, can be and must be related, and also about its connection with the space and ground, on which it exists, blood and language of the creators themselves. Moscow or New-York, international Cologne and Berlin, St Petersburg with its inferiority complexes or the Baltic States healthy in their outward appearance, - where to the Kaliningrad art must aspire, gravitate and address, where its samples, language and problems are, - that’s how the irritating question may be formulated.

It goes without saying that hardly any self-respecting art wants to be satisfied with the provincialism and just to be the language of the local every day life, local complexes. It wants to be universally significant, but at the same time feels that it will be admitted into the metropolis only in case it can preserve or create some peculiarities. In short, in Kaliningrad there arises the problem of the possibility of the local art itself, of “Russian art” within the contemporary mixed, plural and at the same time standardized world.

In principle, the provincial thought, the provincial creative work is totally impossible within the environment of modern communications. It may occur only with deliberate disconnection from the “nets”, ignoring the newest technical media and the flows of all-penetrating information. Anyway, being virtually included into the world unity with its common subjects and interpretation means artists like all other people in general are still physical creatures with their confined and particular nature, place of residence, history and origin. These specialness and concreteness interest the world, which, as it seems, doesn’t want to become a world without the place and origin, without the concrete and

particular, mutually unapproachable features.

Nowadays such a creative approach is widely spread, with which the general technical means, genre and thematic structures, general syntax are combined with the concrete-particular objectness, and the rejected, uninterpretable semantics is latently cultivated. After all, contemporary art constantly turns to the incomprehensible, to the absurdly deadlocking from the angle of the possibilities of bringing together and interpreting without the remainder. Right here everything local and internal in the capacity of the absurd is more than appropriate. It is particularly strange with all its external familiarity, it is hermetic and at the same time it plays the role of the power supply element. Artists frame their local “words” and problems with the conventional and supposedly generally understandable formal procedures and ornaments. At the same time only outwardly in the works of artists from Latin America and Bulgaria in connection with the theme of body and sex the subject is one and the same: either the different, or the other in general, and in most cases the purely structural-and-logical moments of the western mentality. Language and culture, traditions and race are not as easily surmountable as it sometimes seems while working under translation or comparative study of cultures. Vasiliev’s project about the red, Russian red and “Russian Red” may be interpreted as the experiment on testing the efficacy of myths, primary traditional meanings within the modern cosmopolitan culture.

Vasiliev’s project “Russian Red” is a free unfinished sequence of motives and separate exhibition performances, united by the common motto, subject and some structural and technical moments. The presence of the banners and the postcards of the placard character, the monitor and the staged video relate to these moments. In this text, which is not a critical essay but an immediate verbal contribution to the project, let’s consider these peculiarities not from the quality evaluation view but as the expression of the theme of the Russian.

That is a quite simple, open ad infinitum and adapting to circumstances form, and also a typical extraction of synonymic shades and antonymic pairs of notions from the originally found polysemantic word (Russian, red). That’s a very Russian play with the word, chewing the words over.

Here’s the direct employment of modern foreign means and approaches, almost in unfinished condition, for processing the local material, which turns the means themselves into something schematic, on the one hand, and into something frank, on the other hand. The man twirls in his hands a dangerous razor, and he also twirls a digital camera pressing the push-button time after time. The use of

means is direct, bodily, without the reflection in connection with the “media” itself and the denial of “our” motor activity. Although the means allow creating the distance, both the subject and the artist resist it. Distancing is not in the nature of “Russian Red”, and sincere art, direct utterance turns out, whatever irony or humor it is filled with.

The theme of the Russian is current nowadays, numerous political and scientific, popular and esoteric works are devoted to it both in Russia and abroad. The theme is structured so that from its inside it gives birth to the enormous quantity of the definitions forming the exclusive circle. The contradictory definitions of Russia on the whole as politically red and Orthodox white, black and golden transform into one another through more general notions of radicalism, extremism and suicide inclinations to self-liquidation supposedly always characteristic of Russian people. In Vasiliev’s project among the numerous placard images of Russia from the icon Motherland to the Kremlin matreshka there are touched upon some, which have neither religious nor state but rather psychological shade. Of course, his Russian red indirectly correlates with red, or in other words left, communistic Russia, but the main are not the ideas of social equality, but the images of the collective festive actions (starling-houses) and symbols of extremism, radicalism,- and this is the way red relates to the white birches, piglet and people.

In his project Vasiliev creates the feeling of the Russian on a specific instinctive level, or, strictly speaking, the front and the internal form the typical conglomerate, at the same time the instinctive Russian comes forward as the “rude” in general and the “metaphysically” rude, and the lyrical is represented by means of wide outward strokes without the oppressive note often ascribed to the Russian. The “mama” cries, a kind of peculiar mournful music of Russian life, are heart-breaking, hollow and bestial, they don’t bear either any Christian lyrics of tender emotion or any calls for salvation. The Russian is not going to save himself, he cries not to be heard. It is characteristic that the sound image takes the secondary place in Vasiliev’s project, may be, due to the artist’s nature and his subconscious knowledge of the Russian as the stupefied and flown over, - no matter either with the bell ring, or cry, or his own moaning, or bird twitter.

It is also obvious that Vasiliev has introduced the stylistics of Russian avant-guard as the essential motive of avant-guard into the inside of the Russian space. The red color and Malevich’s square, the red chintz of the 20s reminiscent of Rodchenko and Luchishkin, the shot with the starling-boxes, the glossolalia as

the poetry (“mam”), at last placardness, remind of the repertoire of Russian avant-guard. Avant-guard may be considered as the violation of the Russian, rejection of it, but to be more exact, the sublimation of the Russian. In any case avant-guard is the index of the Russian from the “Russian red” point of view. In the neighborhood with the avant-guard motives in Vasiliev’s project are the motives of kitch Russia – the one which pretends with equal right to express the Russian essence. This kitchness is found in both its manifestations – femininely lyrical, sexually-Esenin and brigand-criminal. The birches, Esenin, Kuindgi, Pesniary with their birch juice, Soviet photography and cinematography are neighboring with razors, piglets and dangerous wild men. Here is the theme of Russia being recolored or overshadowed, of false Russia, which either hides under the coat of the paint alien to it, under advertisement and in general under the scab of contemporaneity (including contemporary art itself), or manifests itself in the prodigious riot of clothes-changing and coloring. Perhaps, Vasiliev’s work with “Russian Red” is devoted to the problem of mutual penetration of the initially Russian and the contemporary, the local and the universal, and presents the practice of their unification and identification. The red puts everything in the shade but at the same time reveals in itself and from under itself initial moments, it is active and “progressive” and at the same time it is triumphantly archaic. In connection with this it is necessary to return to the theme of Prussia again, which is so much alien to Russia and with which Russia was so closely connected that it inherited from it the heart-capsule – Koenigsberg, which has become Kaliningrad.

Not all realize that Prussian kingdom, Prussian culture, statehood, “Prussian style” used to be not only politically reactionary in the epoch of bourgeois revolutions and modernization, that the Prussian in the least degree means soil, local, popular and traditional. In the history of Europe Prussia is still an example of the state and political program aimed at the so called conservative modernization. Prussia aspired to the unification of Germany and to the creation of German nation, aspired and propagated the unification based on utilitarianism and technologism. It directed Germany to Europe and the world but at the same time tried to preserve traditional political structures and cultivate the reformed, purified of incidents national values. It is deeply contradictory, but its experience is still an example, though the negative one, of translating the notions of modernization into the traditional language of the national culture.

The problem of Prussian way of development has already risen in the second half of the XIXth century. Russia didn’t follow this way as well as it didn’t

follow the English-American model. The XXth century has ended, Russia seems to be building up the American model, but in practice it reproduces Russian contradictions in the Mexican form, or, to be more precise, it cannot on the whole either choose or generate its form. It concerns not only the economy and politics, but also culture and art. The Prussian task, an unrealizable task when accepting the game terms of the modern world, - this is the task of creating the Russian-contemporary culture, exactly both contemporary and Russian, but necessarily synthetic and homogeneous, possessing the whole coloring, its own color. "Prussian Blue" was also the wish. Prussian culture used to be heterogeneous, split, multilingual and contradictory right up to the incompatibility of the parts. In Germany it was considered as the most pallid, the least German from the back-to-soil movement point of view. Anyway, it was like something integral that even in the XXth century united such different representatives of it as the bourgeois architect Peter Behrens and social-democratically inclined Kolvitz, Goethe-following Gerhard Hauptman and hooligan-like behaving Ringelnatz, etc. The nature of the terminal synthesis was based, in my opinion, on abstracting and sublimation of the features realized as the Prussian characteristic, moral and spiritual, and also on their confident application to the contemporary culture tasks, with the permanent direction of the culture at itself, at the modernized reproduction of its initial intentions, its tone and sense of life. This sense of life penetrates everything connected with Prussia from the traces of the material culture to the language and ideas and makes it monotonous but integral.

Modernization, universalization and sublimation of the Russian are also considered in some circles as the mission of culture in Russia. Some artists try to fulfill it even not suspecting about its existence.

Prussian light blue or blue is connected not with the heraldic color of the Prussian kingdom or its predecessors of Brandenburg Elector and Order State. It traces back to the color of Prussian uniform of the XVIII-XIXth centuries. This cloth color was already introduced for the dragoons by Friedrich Wilhelm von Brandenburg before 1701. Only in 1910 after Anglo-Boer war blue was replaced by grey, the so called field grey familiar to us by the greatcoats of World War I. Hence Prussian blue is the army Prussian color of the XIXth century epoch of victorious wars during the unification of Germany. The so-called Berlin light blue or "Berlin azure" well-known to the artists unites with it. The latter doesn't anyhow relate to the sky color in Berlin, which is seldom really blue, covered by the haze of pale blue-grey hue.

Primarily blue in Germany in general and in Prussia in particular was a negative image. It's the color of devils, witches, ghosts and magic, the color of the sea element, with which German as well as Russian culture never used to be on friendly terms. It was not accepted to paint blue a house or even the shutters. It was forbidden to put a blue thing on the conjugal bed. But they put a piece of blue fabric in the coffin of a deceased, dressed dead persons into the blue uniform, and the soldiers leaving for war were distinguished by their blue uniforms. Of course, blue had other meanings. In poetry from Middle Ages to Romanticism and Symbolism it meant loyalty and deep trust, on the whole belief in the absolute, blue was the symbol of infinity and longing after it. The mythical "loyalty of the Nibelungs" is designated by the blue color, the color of mist and haze, the embodiment of which used to be the Nibelungs themselves. All know the romantic image of the blue flower and "blue hour" before the sunset.

The color of flags of the ancient Prussia of Orders was white, Catholic since "white is the color of all spirits and angels" as Martin Luther once wrote. In the XIXth and XXth centuries blue began to be associated with Prussia in a wider sense, but the heraldic Bavaria blue was its strong competitor. Bavaria as well as Alpine and Mazur lakes and rivers of Eastern Germany are famous for their blue color. Eventually, "the beautiful blue Danube" in Austria has its own special right to the blue color. Nevertheless blue is undoubtedly a Prussian color. Not only Friedrich I Power's blue cut-glass is the evidence of it, but also the typical coloring of the contemporary photo-albums in Berlin, Brandenburg, Mazur region. Here blue are not only the lakes, but also the light blue faience and tile, light bluish silverware. All this is given against the background of what may be called Prussian red – the brick, tiles, red-golden pine-tree trunks. After all Prussian red also exists and it may be even of greater importance than blue. Red is also the royal ermine cloak and the red ribbon of The Black Eagle, red hussar uniform of the legendary hussars of the general Ziten.

As in any national culture red in Germany is polysemantic and one can't say that first of all it evokes associations with the leftishness, Rot-Front, Rote Fane, Telman, Red Chapel and red Bavaria of 1918. The red carnation for the Germans is not the symbol of the socialistic revolution but the ancient symbol of engagement. Red is also the color of Christmas holidays. It is generally known that it belongs to the national flag colors, the flag of 1848. In this case it signifies the blood shed for the Motherland in the struggle against Napoleon in 1813. On the whole red in Germany is interpreted as the color of definiteness unlike the indefinite blue, as the color of life and rouge, not without reason they say: "heute rot, morgen tot", that is "today is still red, but tomorrow is already dead". Still

neither riot, nor holiday, nor beauty in general is red-colored in Germany. All the more it relates to Protestant Prussia, which in Germany is rather conceived as colorless and drearily blue, and Prussian virtues – sense of duty, obedience, thrift, diligence – are drawn with harsh black and blindingly white lines.

Prussian aristocratism is completely devoid of the heraldic diversity of colors as compared to the neighbor Polish and Saxon one. The strict black, white, grey-steel and again the blue (glass) define the virtual coloring of Prussia in the XXth century, in which there are steel and concrete of the aggressive and technically advanced industrial state. At all that Prussia is the split into two, pathologically contradictory historical image, image of trauma, downfall, unsuccessful project attracting one's imagination exclusively owing to its maniacal consistency and intention of perfection. On the one hand, it is the dreary and gloomy barracks, red post and railway, spirit of timetable, captivity and violence towards an individual and peculiarity. On the other hand, this very Prussia is the spaciousness and fresh cold air of lucidity, soberness of spirit, definiteness of moral positions. Prussia claimed to the empire and used to be the real Reich for a short period of time. Its initial impulse is the colonization, spreading of civilization in minimal but extremely sharpened forms. They disliked Prussia exactly for its unification tendencies. Really, it intended to raise the provincialism of the remote colonies to the norm and absolute, like the USA, and wanted to subdue all spheres of life to the absolute of organization, wanted to replace art with the beauty of the expedient form and function. In its progressivism it was simultaneously tolerant and intolerant. It went away from the womb, the warmth of which it was always devoid of, but against its will it intensified the pressure of the inheritance burden, which it could not regard flexibly and from distance.

Except for a few connoisseurs, Prussia was generally disliked in the same way as Germany was and still is. It doesn't rejoice appearing in the face of the teacher, moral model and a hurt friend. Germany, ponderous as the twinges of conscience, devoid of the artistry with its fine forgetfulness and day-dreaming, is still conceived to be the punishment of Europe, or even its pigsty. But above all Prussia disliked itself. That is its essential distinction from narcissistic Russia, which in no way can say that it is not beloved in the world. Even its enemies always felt some special gravitation to it.

Both Prussia and that very Germany in the full sense of the word do not exist any longer. As well, perhaps, as Russia isn't, about which one may speak in

the singular. What have remained from it are just insoluble problems and ideals, inherited by Europe and other countries, and also the space, cities and countries, of which Prussia consisted and which it had formed to a certain extent. Russia is one of the successors, especially the Kaliningrad region, which got the smallest, but especially essential and not so easily annihilatable piece of Prussia. Razed to the ground it is at the same time more preserved and virulent than colonized Silesia and Warmia, Danzig and Breslau. In a mysterious way this piece appeals to something special in culture, forms its new inhabitants' unexpected feelings and streaks. It prompts to some special unity of pride and openness, internal duty and love, cosmopolitanism and complete autonomousness, appeals to the special color of culture, in which the main should be not the ethnic, but the moral and metaphysical basis, noble and at the same time bionegative – blue.

Long ago the Russian listened attentively to this voice, now it listens to it in a different way even not knowing its name. It is tempted by this note of the first water, this challenge to cut off the umbilical cord, go away high into the air and grow with its roots into space. There are close features in the Russian, but still there are more different of them, on which it's difficult to build up the culture simultaneously traditional and contemporary. All the colors, alike all the cultures, are equally significant and they are equally intensive, there are no major and subordinate among them, superior and inferior, all of them take their soul away with the inexpressible power. And all of them, especially pure, basic, to which blue and red relate, are absolutely different and introvert no matter how they try to represent them as the rainbow, as the distinctiveless purely physical and quantitative transition. There exists the metaphysics of blue and red, radicalism and riot of blue and also the idealism of red. Prussian blue and Russian red are different, though they have strived for one another since long. They came across each other and moved aside with the mutual disappointment of misunderstanding. The reason is the different ability to the metaphysics of lucidity and the metaphysics of non-lucidity, in different comprehension of the Form category.

For the blue, Prussian one, overcoming blue in black, white and golden, lucidity is the clearness of the evaluation found once and forever, clearness of the form as loyalty, of the motionless along the horizontal line. Here both non-lucidity and contemplateness (the blue!) themselves are felt as the rarefied, clarified, but not softened clearness. Non-lucidity is the instant before the accurate throw, before the faultless shot into the aim. Even a mistake here is not a mistake. The highest category is the estimation and aiming. For the red, the Russian, contemplateness is completely different. It is rather a wondering, a dream awake,

it's the dissolution in the space, light and air and lending one's ear to the inward. Such contemplateness also knows the lucidity, but this lucidity is the clearness of the perceptible presence, chill of the razor blade in one's hand, lucidity of the evident neighborhood with the essence we obviously feel. This is the clearness of being seized by the condition, being in God's or the element's power. Only the evaluation, the shot are not given as Russian, they are not given in lucidity but in process and modulations. Hence the constant fluctuation from the imitation merging with what should be finally evaluated to the betrayal and even revenge with the attempt to preserve the softness and the right to further sensing the absolute somewhere around. This excruciating mixture of love and betrayal, kindness and anger requires some remedy for oblivion. This remedy is Russian red, the fire of blindness, the delight of the blazing sheaf, on the ash of which the wheat is just more fertile.

Let's think where we encounter red in the nature, in our Russian nature. First of all, it's blood, animal and human blood, woman's blood, the victim of a murder, an accident, the blood shed in a duel and in a war. Secondly, it's red or, to be more exact, the reddish-brown color of clay and paint on the whole, and hence it's the color of craft, civilization, potter-craft and weaving. Like the color of paint in general red is connected with coloring and cosmetics. Here it would be appropriate to admit that Red in the nature is seldom on the surface. There are few red flowers and red is rare like the berries, the juice of which paints. But berries as well as juice and even flowers, alike everything red, are hidden inside, in the shade, under the cover of the black, grey and green earth and shade. Thus, although red always singles out and emphasizes, is expansive and lies in the foreground, in essence it is inside, it boils inside. Laying down on the surface, on top, it appeals to the internal. Everything bestial, hot, wet and sticky like blood, dynamic but inclined to thickening and darkening, is red, and it is rarely light as well as it is rarely the definiteness since it always reveals the crisis, the cross-roads. Singling something out definitely, drawing attention to it, red at the same time embraces an object and transfers it into the crisis condition, which is not so much to result in a certain following condition as to cool down. Red prepares, glows, but mostly wakens and gets dirty. It just seems that there is a way to the opposite, green and neutral white and black. Red doesn't refer to somewhere like blue, it rages here filling up the indefiniteness of the crisis condition with the blazing of the color itself, the color of possession.

It may seem strange, but the fact is that the symbol of Russia and the

Slavonic people on the whole, in particular of the native and the alien Poland is the red color. It turns out that Russian red combines in itself lots of contrasts and lots of borrowings, the whole rainbow of shades. It's not monolithic in its composition. But it is monolithic in its tendency. Russian red is simultaneously folk, peasant and European, Mediterranean. It is the foreign cinnabar, Byzantine purple, and the ochre-earth, and the berry juice. For the ambivalence of the Russian red essence it is typical that there is much of it in the Russian language and consciousness. Beauty and red maiden, red line and thread, red corner and the Red Square, the Red Gates, The Frost-Red-Nose, scarlet flower and apple, the rouge, red one. However there is quite little of it, there is little red in Russian landscape and in Russian city, where the white, grey, blue and green colors predominate. Russian churches' domes are shining with the golden and light blue colors. There is much red in the folk art, in the costume with its red top-boots and red caftans, kerchiefs, etc., red played an essential role, especially as the background, in ancient icon-painting, but generally speaking the Orthodox Church coloring is rather honey-golden, dark, but not red. It's possible to say that the value of red in Russian consciousness is still lower than golden and white, a pure one, after all red appeals to the lowest spheres of sensuality and national character, not to the transcendental, the heroic spirit and beauty, and not to truth. It seems that in Russia red is the color of self-excitement and is magnetic, enchanting one. From the formlessness and colorlessness of the environment and the inability to bring the creative evaluation and the definiteness into it.

Russian soul strives for this extreme energetic condition of boiling.

The contemporary Russian artist Yury Vasiliev represents an interesting experiment of the "Russian Red" experiences. His project is as multi-composite as our red, it also resists the final definitions, it is simultaneously passionate and cold. This project helps us experience our Russian thought stretching along the wide space of Eastern Europe and not only Europe, it helps us to distance ourselves from red keeping faithfulness to it as to the life form of the thought-feeling. With all one's might following the steel, really blue Prussian motto: "For belief and faithfulness".