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Pivovarov, Viktor. 2017. *Serye Tetradi* (Moscow: Garazh), 366 pp.
Pivovarov, Viktor. 2020. *Vliublennyi agent,* (Moscow: Garazh), 368 pp.
Pivovarov, Victor. 2021. *The Agent in Love*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (Moscow: Garage), 372 pp.
Monastyrski, Andrei. 2021. *Kashira Highway*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (Moscow: Garage), 232 pp.

That *Artists Write,* the title of the series in which these books are published, was something that went without saying for the generation of Russian unofficial artists working in 1970s Moscow. These artists not only made images but wrote and talked endlessly. They had little chance of public exhibition but there was just enough official neglect for a life of private gatherings, viewings of each other's work, poetry readings and conversation, to thrive. Artists kept extensive archives of their own work, for want of a gallery or exhibiting world.[1] As Il'ia Kabakov describes it, a relentless energy for talk rather than any one mode of artistic production distinguished the life of the time.[2] Speculation about truth in art and life, and the relation between words and image was conducted with a singular intensity.

[1] See the MANI archive at russianartarchive.net and Garage Archive Collection garagemca.org. Vadim Zakharov's website (vadimzakharov.com) was an excellent source of original documents of the movement but has been under reconstruction for some time. Sergei Letov's site is also a source of original documents https://conceptualism.letov.ru/MANI/sborniki.html [Accessed 30 December 2022]. A collection of documents from the archive was published in book form in 2011 (Monastyrskii 2011).

[2] "*U menia i u vsekh "nas" potrebnost' govorit' byla plamennaia, kak eto opisyvaetsia v literature 19-go veka*" / *"I, and all of "us" had a burning desire for talk, as in the descriptions in 19th century literature"* (Kabakov et al. 2010: 62), see also Kabakov 2010: 96.

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Moscow Conceptualism or, as Boris Groys first called it, Moscow Romantic Conceptualism (Groys 2010: 35–38) had its heyday in the 1970s.[3] The spoken and written word had great importance in the movement, in an environment where the book was synonymous with culture.[4] The pursuit of art that could be realised verbally as much as visually was not new in Russia, but this period saw an burst of improvisation with word and image not known since the decade before the revolution[5], and a hunger for the written word. As the writer Ludmila Ulitskaya recently told a Glasgow audience — at no other time in Soviet life did people read so widely and voraciously (Ulitskaya: 2017). People read whatever they could get their hands on, texts were passed on sometimes for only a night or two — they were memorised, discussed, recited and read aloud in private gatherings.

This hidden art life of 1970s Moscow is vividly evoked in both Pivovarov's autobiographical books, *Vliublennyi agent*/*Agent in Love* and *Serye tetradi* (The Grey Notebooks). These have been reissued and expanded by *Garage* from their first incarnations (*Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie,* 2001 and 2002), with an elegant layout and good quality colour illustration and photography. They are published for the first time in English translation, a feat that has been deftly achieved by Andrew Bromfield. Pivovarov describes an atmosphere where "some foreword or footnote in an extremely boring, strictly scholarly book becomes an event for the whole of cultural Moscow" (Pivovarov 2021: 93). He pictures for us in words and images the friendships, the playfulness, the endless talk, at tables in studio cellars and attics or private flats. Works of art were exhibited to friends and critiqued with great seriousness. In this uneasy absurd of Soviet life, small groups of restless people with a nag to create made the most of what freedoms could be realised without attracting official attention.

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[3] Kabakov dates this intense period of artistic enquiry and camaraderie as beginning in the 1960s. By the 1980s, he believed that its essential drive had been exhausted, although other archivists of the movement would argue that its work went on well up until Perestroika, if not beyond. (Kabakov et al. 2010: 216-218).

[4] In Kabakov's words, the book was synonymous with culture: "*Kniga i kul'tura byli sinonimy*" (Kabakov 2010: 94).

[5] Verbal and visual experiment drove the work of early twentieth century Futurist painters and *zaum* poets. Roman Jakobson's Dialogues (with Katerina Pomorska) emphasise this dual source for Russian artists of the period, and points out the primacy of words over images, rooting this in Slavonic religious tradition (Jakobson et al. 1983: 7-9; 152-156).

Pivovarov states that his two books should be read simultaneously — one in each hand, or with one eye on each text. *Serye Tetradi* is a polyphony composed of actual and invented texts voiced by characters who have been introduced to us in the more conventionally autobiographical narrative of *The Agent in Love.* The books take us on a journey not just through Pivovarov's work but through the physical and imaginative settings of the city from which it emerged, and which remained formative after the artist's move to Prague in 1982.

The Agent in Love is composed of three sections: *The First Life,* set in Moscow from 1951 to 1981, *The Second Life,* after the artist moved to Prague aged forty five, and *The Third Millennium*, life after 2000. The first section is the only one chaptered as a chronology. We learn of the artist's early influences, his training and work as an illustrator of children's books. This was an ideologically less risky space where formal visual experimentation was somewhat under the radar. Many unofficial artists in Soviet Russia earned their living through illustration, of scientific journals or children's literature. Pivovarov points out the high status that illustrated children's books had at the time, offering imaginative escape for the downtrodden liberal intelligentsia who avidly collected them as "one of the breathing spaces within harsh Soviet culture" (Pivovarov 2021: 91).

The spoken word was as important as the printed. Pivovarov describes his earliest inspiration as aural: listening to stories told on the radio, and realising the power of spoken words to stimulate the visual imagination in the visually impoverished surroundings of his Soviet childhood. This power of words to elicit rich imaginary scenes over visually bleak Soviet realities as well as the physical texture of the spoken word itself, the pleasure in speaking words aloud, was vital. The ear as an almost sacred channel of communication is a recurrent motif in Pivovarov's drawings and painting.

The Second Life, after the artist's emigration, unfolds more thematically as, after the shock of complete physical and artistic displacement, Pivovarov slowly evolves ways to work, and realises that the vital source of his work is Moscow, and his childhood: "Nothing except Moscow exists" (Pivovarov 2021: 166). These emerge as constant themes once the dust of rupture has settled. The city's physical presence is experienced

all the more powerfully from an enforced distance. Images came first, and then the impulse to narrate, to set down specific autobiographical stories. They were realised in *Diary of a Teenager (1986)* and *Apartment 22 (1992-1996),* in the Album genre of pictures and text that Pivovarov and Kabakov discovered "simultaneously yet separately"[6] in the early seventies. These new albums were provoked, Pivovarov says, by "the need to tell the story of my childhood more fully and in more personal terms" (Pivovarov 2021: 167).

In the deliberately pared down verbal and visual aesthetic of *Apartment 22*, the life of the communal flat where Pivovarov grew up with his mother, the scraps of dialogue and items of Soviet everyday *byt*, tools or shopping list items written out in uniform script, have a rich resonance. Everyday Russian words have phonic and even visual power, transmitting a vivid sense of time and place from the artist's displacement. In other works, words alone are enough: the series *Beautiful Actions*[7] was inspired by a facsimile of notes in Malevich's handwriting on a scrap from a school exercise book. Here as in *Apartment 22*, ordinary domestic actions are given pause, and become strangely poetic. They are a stimulus to memory, or an imagined memory, of everyday life. A 1992 exhibition in Prague, *The Unlimited Possibilities of Painting,* takes this method further — a show of images evoked entirely from written texts, which the viewer is asked to picture in their mind.

There are some historical glimpses— Vaclav Havel observed smoking nervously in the corridor of his home in November 1989, on the eve of his transformation into world hero, but mostly this is an account of the artist's thoughts about his works, the work of his Moscow contemporaries, and artists of the past. The final section of *The Agent in Love* is published here for the first time. It presents stories of works and friendships in the new century, a New Year in Prague with D. A. Prigov (with a nice colour photo), and a series of paintings, *Lemon Eaters (2005),* subtitled "*A Moscow Poem".* Here Pivovarov returns again to his childhood in the *Zamoskvorech'e* district of Moscow, mixing specific memories with memories "which could have been mine" (Pivovarov 2021: 278), in the way that the artist feels that he "recognises" specific details

[6] *Na etot vid iskusstva my odnovremenno i porozn' natolknulis' s Pivovarovoi vesnoi 1972 goda* (Kabakov 2011: 176). See also Pivovarov 2021 (Pivovarov 2021: 108-109).
[7] *Krasivye Deistviia (1989),* the title could be an echo of Andrei Monastyrskii's group *Kollektivnye Deistviia.*

from Platonov's novel *Happy Moscow,* which was written in the months approaching his birth in January 1937 (Pivovarov 2021: 164).

In a 2003 essay *Bumaga kak tekst* (*Paper as Text*) Pivovarov added a further epithet to descriptions of the Moscow conceptualist movement that was becoming a subject of renewed attention: "Moscow conceptualism is paper conceptualism" (Pivovarov 2004: 28).[8] Works made with paper, as notebooks and albums, and the use of everyday paper documents, became central to the output of both Pivovarov and his friend Il'ia Kabakov, as well as to the wider movement. The sea of paper detritus becomes an expressive ground in which the printed paper residues of a totalitarian bureaucracy: notifications, forms, receipts, declarations and requests, meet with its opposition, a personal attention which converts these residues into something intimate and human — refuse becoming a mode of refusal (Pivovarov 2004: 32-33). Pivovarov evokes the intimacy and materiality of paper (Pivovarov 2004: 24-25), something that he connects with post-war shortages and the preciousness of every piece, a time when people hand-sewed their own notebooks from whatever material they could find, and makes a connection between paper and memory — paper as a material conveyor of memory, an imprint of life, even as Pivovarov says, "my mirror" (Pivovarov 2004: 25).

Attention to paper was not new. The elder artist Vladimir Favorskii's lectures on the metaphysics of paper were influential (Pivovarov 2021: 37). In his essay Pivovarov argues that Favorskii's true heirs were not, as conventionally thought, the officially sanctioned landscape realists, but leading figures of Moscow's unofficial scene, among them Kabakov, Bulatov and Prigov. He also cites Robert Falk and the lesser known Mitia Lion as artistic influences (Pivovarov 2004: 26, 34-35). *Serye Tetradi* comprises an actual, as well as an invented paper archive, presented to the reader in the (literary) form of ten grey notebooks, as though from the artist's childhood. The title alludes to the standardised and official constraint of a Soviet post war childhood from which a full colour im-

[8] This essay (Pivovarov 2004: 24-38) was published as part of an excellent collection of Pivovarov's essays on art which was the third book of his writing to be issued by *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie.* However it is not, as far as I know, due to be reissued by *Garage*. Conceptualism has attracted many qualifiers to distinguish it from its Western European counterpart, these include romantic, lyric, warm, and emotional. Pivovarov adds to these descriptions an emphasis on its *rukopisnost' (handwrittenness)* (Pivovarov 2004: 61).

aginative invention emerges. The cheap grey exercise books are the ground for flight, for intimacy and imagination, playfulness and storytelling. This book contains invented notebooks and diaries as well as actual notes and letters from friends. Both forms reveal aspects of the artist's autobiography from the viewpoints of others, even if these are viewpoints and voices imagined by the artist.

Thus the first notebook *Inter'ery* (Interiors), contains a series of numbered descriptions of rooms, as though glimpsed through a window. These pictures in words, which include evocations of actual pictures on the walls, we slowly realise (and footnotes in successive "notebooks" make clear), are all rooms from the artist's life. Like a painting, or an image in a dream the artist re-sees the room in the communal flat where he grew up, his neighbour's room where he went to draw, the different rooms of his studio, his summer dacha, always from a specific and singular viewpoint. We put together the whole from these multiple viewpoints.

The second notebook is supposedly written by an inhabitant of one of these interiors: it presents extracts from the notebooks of Grigorii Sergeevich Tatuzov who, if we have already read *The Agent in Love*, we know to be an actual neighbour in the communal flat where Pivovarov grew up with his mother — the notes give us a touching account of the unnamed artist's early discovery of drawing, observed from the proximity and distance that was distinctive to such communal existences. Tatuzov is a "small man", a shy mouth organ player. His literary origins are in 19th century Russian literature, the unnoticed clerks of Dostoevskii and Gogol', and their narrative forms of imaginary correspondences or diary notes.[9]

Notebook No.5, *Filimon, ili deistvitel'nye zapiski iz podpol'ia* (*Filimon or the real notes from underground*) continues the literary theme with writings by a well-read mouse who lives in Pivovarov's studio and narrates the comings and goings there, the daily life of Pivovarov and his son Pasha.[10] Perhaps the best descriptions of Pivovarov's friendships

[9] Pivovarov emphasises the literary, narrative aspect of Moscow Conceptualism in his essay *O Liubvi slova i izobrazheniia (On Love of the Word and the Image)* (Pivovarov 2004: 54-62 (60)).

[10] Pasha Pivovarov, now known as artist Pavel Pepperstein, and co-founder of the art group *Medical Hermeneutics*.

with Kabakov, and with the poets Ovsei Driz, Igor' Kholin and Henrich Sapgir are voiced by this observant creature, whose words are occasionally corrected in a footnote by Pivovarov (as V. P.) himself. An appendage to the text, "Filimon's collection", is an opportunity to display an assemblage of actual documents from the life described, in reproduction: a photo-booth shot of Pivovarov and his young son paper-clipped to a rough drawing on a piece of crumpled paper (possibly a receipt) by the Georgian poet Driz, drawings by artist and poet friends, a felt-tip doodle by the poet Kholin and more wild drawings by Driz in an open notebook, childhood drawings of mice by Pasha Pivovarov, photographs and newspaper clippings. There is a photograph of a haystack by Joseph Brodsky that he gave to Pivovarov when he visited the studio, shortly before he left Russia. These documents are laid out on the page as though they had all been secreted between the covers of the notebook.

More documents from the paper archive follow in Notebook No.6, compiled from handwritten notes left by the artist's friends on his studio door. Sadly these are printed, not reproduced facsimile in the original. These messages to the artist were scribbled down on chance scraps, often on official notepaper[11]. In this pre-electronic world the contrast in language and appearance between printed, state-issued forms or receipts and the handwritten intimate message or drawing inscribed across them was resonant. Soviet bureaucracy furnished ample opportunity for such felicitous clashes of language and material, particularly when paper was precious.

In the third notebook the artist's life is presented as a screenplay, with camera directions to help us imagine the cuts and the zooms, and indications for colour or black and white sequences. Each chapter is introduced by a title card, as in silent cinema. It is as though the artist has closed his eyes and is orchestrating an inner vision of his childhood in post-war Moscow. Familiar motifs such as his first encounter with Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale *Ole-Lukøje* being read on the radio (also described in *Agent in Love)*, are juxtaposed with new ones from history (or History): the young artist transfixed by his first sighting of Stalin at a Mayday demonstration. A description of the endless queues for the

[11] Other texts from this archive were used in Pivovarov's 1976 Album *Cад (Garden),* (Pivovarov 2004: 31).

first exhibition of works from the Dresden Gallery at the Pushkin Museum (which the young artist still managed to attend eight times) is followed by an entire poem-recitation of revered artists.[12]

One of Pivovarov's earliest and best known series is the *Projects for a Lonely Man*, made in the 1970s. Loneliness or solitude (*odinochestvo*) recurs throughout his work. Pivovarov says that this theme is "constantly present, it is an Ariadne's thread, running straight through me, and I couldn't lose this thread, even if I wanted to" (Pivovarov 2021: 165). It is embodied in the figure of Igor Kholin, poet and friend of the artist, who emerges as Pivovarov's artistic hero. Kholin, together with his friend the poet Sapgir, is repeatedly celebrated in both books. Pivovarov commemorated both men shortly before their death with home-made illustrated books, reminiscent of Futurist publications (Pivovarov 2021: 244). The seventh notebook in *Serye Tetradi* is dedicated to the two men, with anecdotes, reminiscences, photographs and drawings as well as Kholin's own letters to the artist and some of his quotes or "*sententsiia*" (Pivovarov 2017: 216-255). The poems inspired some exciting rougher illustrations (which Pivovarov calls his "hooligan" style) for various editions of Kholin's work, including his first translation into Czech in 2012 (Pivovarov 2021: 341-346). The poet embodies an ideal of artistic integrity and freedom, almost an alter-ego for the artist, with his attitude of "conscious solitude" that is more important than artistic fame, and even a form of resistance (Pivovarov 2017: 285-286). Kholin died in relative obscurity in 1999. But Pivovarov's sense of Kholin's significance proved prescient, with new interest from a younger generation beyond Russia, and posthumous publications and translations of his poems, prose and diaries.[13]

If Pivovarov's evocations of Moscow, and of loneliness have a lyrical, wistful mood, *Kashira Highway,* Andrei Monastyrskii's novelised account of a nervous and spiritual crisis in the winter of 1981-82, is pitched in quite a different mode. Monastyrskii was a leading figure

[12] You can hear Pivovarov recite this poem at the start of the interview he recorded for the Tret'iakov Gallery series "The Artist Speaks" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fv-Nfl_r22M&list=RDCMUCCJR2fHtwpHs5eYirnbCNQA&index=4 [Accessed 30 December 2022].

[13] There has been extensive publication of Kholin's poetry and prose in Russia, as well as published translations in Israel and the Czech Republic and the recent English translation of the poet's selected diaries and prose (Kholin 2018).

among the Moscow Conceptualists and is mentioned several times in Pivovarov's books. The illustrations have been made for this edition by Pavel Pepperstein, Pivovarov's son, and it has been translated by Andrew Bromfield. The text was first published in 1987 as part of the series *Poezdki za gorod* (Trips out of town), produced by the group *Kollektivnye Deistviia* (Collective Actions), founded by Monastyrskii in 1976. The art critic and historian of Moscow Conceptualism, Ekaterina Degot, calls the book "a novel I would put in the top ten, possibly even top five Russian books ever written" (Degot 2014: 51).

The novel is an account of spiritual practice pushed to extreme. A self-imposed régime of prayer (recitation of the Hesychast Jesus prayer) and fasting produces a visionary state by which everyday Soviet reality is transformed and becomes saturated with divine and demonic essence. The setting of Moscow is crucial. Moscow at the very start of the 1980s becomes a battleground between forces of destruction and forces of spiritual light, and these energies constellate at everyday corners and in everyday objects — the boot sign of a shoe repair shop in a back court, the needles and rulers on the counter of a basement dry cleaners: "it never even occurred to me to regard all these effects as manifestations of psychosis and delirium. I perceived them as a demonic apparition, legitimised by a thousand-year-old tradition" (Monastyrskii 2021: 131). The inclusion of recognisable street names, tram numbers and places give the reader a much needed topographic anchor in the reality of the city, from which the writer is continually taking off on spiritual and imaginative flights. Complex elaborations of these visions are set against reassuring detail of the Soviet everyday — the metro escalator, a three kopeck coin, light on a linoleum floor.

Many of the artists of the 1970s and 80s made work that engaged with the disjunction between the symbols and discourse of Soviet ideology and the experience of everyday life. *Kashira Highway* pushes these layers of perception to an extreme. The visible symbols and structures of the Soviet state are interpreted through the protagonist's spiritual practice until the five-pointed star on the button of the wadded jacket of a man opposite him on a suburban train becomes proof of Soviet Russia's unique spiritual role: "having clarified the spiritual position of Soviet ideology in the divine dispensation and tied up all loose ends, I was highly delighted with my own expert hermeneutic knowledge, and for a

while, I regarded the surrounding ideological reality in a completely different light" (Monastyrskii 2021: 122).

Despite anticipations of spiritual transformation, the artist's condition remains one of estrangement. Finding himself on a bus full of military personnel, as he travels back to Moscow after visiting relatives outside the city, he observes: "I was very keenly aware of the passengers' consensual reality and their communal solidarity, so alien to me (…) I had absolutely no connection with this communal solidarity of theirs. My loneliness was appalling and hopeless" (Monastyrskii 2021: 120). Such passages elicit recognition from the reader beyond any recourse to psychotic excuse. This loneliness is at its extreme when the protagonist is separated from Moscow. The city is a crucial holding ground and site of transformation, which the author notes under the heading "Unfamiliar City", in his journal. These are intimations of Moscow as a sort of eternal, spiritual city connected with childhood perceptions, as in Pivovarov's writing, but in a very different mode:

The essential element of these experiences was an extraordinary clear, surprising, and new perception of streets, buildings, the sky, and so on, a perception that was previously entirely unknown to me. Every now and then, my glance stumbled across sections of the urban topography that I had never seen before, and at spots through which I had definitely walked a thousand times. (…) In all probability, as a result of all this turbulence in my brain, long-forgotten layers of memory, containing information about my visual perception as a child, had risen to the surface (Monastyrskii 2021: 173-174).

Kashira Highway is grounded in the experience of a city, and an ideological discourse, that was formative for the artists of this time: a complex and elaborately symbolised construction overlaying an unwieldy human reality palpably at odds with the slogans and imagery that strove to contain it. The city held a secret poetry of back courtyards, neglected everyday objects and even rubbish heaps; things full of artistic potential, but overlooked and discarded by the controlling ideology. This ideology, though recognised by artists as hollow and absurd, was structured by an ideal of absolute truth and synthesis. Soviet education was underpinned by a culture of "*vseznanie*" or universal knowledge, that was implied in the founding myth of the Soviet new man but also echoed the ambitions of frustrated intellectuals, the desire to know

"everything". Hunger for encyclopaedic knowledge, as well as metaphysical and religious speculation were intrinsic to the atmosphere. Kabakov singles out Monastyrski and Pavel Pepperstein as outstanding embodiments of this "universal thinking", and sees their attitude as part of an existing Russian intellectual tradition that was incorporated into the ideology of the Soviet state (Kabakov et al. 2010: 204-207). He acknowledges the serious interest in religious philosophy among artists and writers in the 1970s but insists that this was not an impassioned "existential" enquiry in the spirit of Munch and his circle (Kabakov 2010: 97). Monastyrski's experience seems to contradict this. The journey made in *Kashira Highway* puts religious speculation to a high pressure test. It makes for an intense and somewhat claustrophobic read, shot through with glimpses of recognition of the physical fabric of Soviet Moscow.

Kabakov has downplayed the autobiographical aspects of the art made in this period (Kabakov 2010: 96-97). However the books reviewed here seem to belie such a definitive conclusion. Both are extremely personal documents of a singular time and place that contain a kaleidoscopic variety of voices, viewpoints and forms, actual and invented, specific to the world from which they emerged. They richly supplement the growing archive of documentation, reminiscence and debate about the artistic life of the period, and help us to situate the movement of Moscow Conceptualism in the wider context of Russian, and not purely Soviet, literary, artistic and philosophical traditions.

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