

## Ethical Paradoxes of Russian Utopia in European Museums

*Article: Maria Nazarenko, philosopher and art critic*

*Translated by: Tetiana Yevloyeva*

I recall the 2019 [Rouge](#) exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris, where the single word “Red” was meant to consolidate all of Soviet art, from the avant-garde to socialist realism. The project was mounted on a grand scale, with the exhibition occupying two floors of the palace, representing paintings along with sculpture, theater, cinema, architecture, design, photography, and fashion of that period. Even *The Moon* exhibition dedicated to space exploration, which was held simultaneously, unassumingly occupied only one floor and several exhibition halls. All of it was held under the brand of the New World, utopia, the Promised Land, while no posting ever mentioned literally the reddest part, namely Soviet [terror](#) in the form of persecution, exile, and murder.

I would like to believe that it wasn't an act of deliberate, direct deception of the public, but rather a quiet intelligent blackout, a sort of bracketing out. In that case, however, one can't but ask a painful and utterly unobvious question about its goal: why is the “red movement” being idealized so one-sidedly? Do art curators, in particular Nicola Lucci-Gutnikov, not appropriate the Soviet as such through art, because “rouge” is everything and nothing? Is it the great Red Sea, in which all individual voices and experiences of other peoples are drowned? Where there is no destiny or drama, only unanimous solidarity in building a new world? Where, as the leader of the band *Grazhdanskaya Oborona* (Rus. “Civil Defence”) Yegor Letov, sang, “navernaie vaabshche nie nada budiet umirat” (Rus. “one would probably never have to die at all”)?

Latvian artist Gustav Klutsis, whose works were included in the exhibition as those belonging to the artist of the new order, had been executed in 1938 “for involvement with the Latvian nationalists’ fascist conspiracy” on the grounds of “admission of his guilt.” It took 52 years for his son to learn the details of the sentence and the truth about the trial. Even back then, the standard Russian-Soviet leadership’s repressive procedures were in place: arrest, confiscation of property, interrogation, confession under torture, and, finally, execution. In 1956, it turned out that there were no confessions, and the subject of the interrogation was fiction; therefore, Gustav Klutsis was fully acquitted.

Every Latvian artist from Klutsis’ social network who found their way to Moscow never returned to their homeland. We are speaking of artists Alexander Drevin, Voldemar Anderson, Wilhelm Jakob, and Karl Weidemann, whose articles in the 1930s were reminiscent of calls for massacre rather than critical essays. Some of those texts were literally submitted as evidence in fabricated criminal cases. It’s hypothesized that sudden deaths of avant-garde artists at young ages between 1937 and 1939 could mean only one thing: they were of unnatural, violent causes. Mass graves are still being found, yet Russia keeps careful guard of the archives detailing those crimes.

Kazimir Malevich, one of the subjects of the red utopia by [Rouge](#), who is constantly being listed as one of the prominent Russian artists (despite his self-identification as a Ukrainian, as evidenced by autobiographical notes and interrogation records), managed to organize his exhibition in Europe only once, in 1927. In the process, he was “politely” asked to return to the Soviet Union; although he managed to leave his archive in Berlin, he was never able to get out of the USSR again. The irony is that Malevich was about to go to Paris, but the Soviet authorities deprived him of this right. And then in 2019, the capital of France exhibited his works among the Soviet art without a shadow of a dissonance.

Russian culture is trying very hard to appropriate Malevich, for whom they had closed every opportunity for development just because of their colonial ambition. His teaching experience at the Kyiv Art Institute ended with his forced return to Leningrad. Malevich showed an excessive tendency towards reflection, which, in terms of requirements in Soviet Ukraine’s educational system, was an unacceptable flaw. In general, the philosophical elements of education had been consistently eradicated from Ukrainian culture since the time of the Russian Empire. For instance, putting on

Ukrainian theatre performances that had any ideological background was unacceptable as early as in the 19th century. Instead, they offered to depict rural life as comedy. For many centuries, that policy has shaped the idea of Ukraine being a country deprived of high meanings, of progressive urban culture, and where no serious conversation or discussion is possible. And it is not a matter of some special greatness of Russian culture, but of its favorite methods of belittling, despising, and humiliating other cultures in order to enjoy the illusion of its narcissistic superiority. The victim's sense of inferiority is created through the unlimited power of the aggressor, who is right only from the position of suppressing the Different.

In the case of the “Red Exhibition” in Paris, the visitors are fed with — not nostalgia, of course, but the idea of the past united in a naïve belief in the “shining path;” a past that’s a bit awkward yet so “sincere” in the pursuit of that path. Such curatorial guidelines gradually lead us to the conclusion that the wonderful plan of the proletarian paradise simply failed, offering no analysis of the reasons for that “failure.” The artistic narrative prances to a rather vague finale, where the figure of Stalin seems to emerge out of the blue, only to become an ellipsis, a symbolic premonition in this story. The exposition ends in 1953. But what about the good, flawless idea that simply was untimely? Can it have another try, just to say “the time has come?”

Utopia is always beautiful, and therefore beyond criticism, beyond any ethical category. Subtle metamorphoses of Soviet art were overlooked by the French public, who felt as if they were soaking up something extremely romantic. At the exit, which is always through the “souvenir shop,” one could take “something red” as a keepsake. In this setting, propaganda posters were suddenly seen as something funny and apt, and anecdotes about “Russian vodka” were portrayed as an interesting souvenir acquisition. No critical article offering comprehensive and unbiased analysis was published after the exhibition ended. Only the sole voices of [Lithuanian journalists](#) ringed with apprehension amid the tacit approval of the majority.

The same thing happened at the Queen Sophia Museum in Madrid, at the 2018 exhibition on “[Russian Dadaism](#).” Careful recreation of the atmosphere of the early twentieth century substituted for the multitude of peoples who played their part in the genesis of such a complex phenomenon as Dadaism. Ignored was the fact that not all of them were Russians; there were also people of Belarussian, Georgian and Ukrainian descent. Ilya Zdanevich, an artist of Polish and Georgian ancestry who lived in Tbilisi and later in Paris, was listed as a “Russian Dadaist.” Not once in 54 years of emigration did he visit his “Soviet homeland.” Or, take Volodymyr Tatlin, who worked extensively in Kyiv and Kharkiv, illustrated publications by Ukrainian poets, loved to perform Ukrainian songs on the bandura, and also suddenly turned out to be a “Russian Dadaist.”

With this approach, “Dada”, too, becomes a pleasant souvenir, leaving a halo of stunning grandeur and equally stunning (and seemingly accidental) inaccuracy. Mythological inaccuracy is seen as the prerogative of Russian discourse in Europe’s exhibition space.

And while national cultures are trying to figure out the means of fitting themselves into the global context and representing themselves globally, Russian culture, having achieved exhibition consensus, dictates how the global context should fit itself into the Russian culture. It seems to me that the only way to eliminate this mythological inaccuracy lies in carrying out a thorough museum audit concerning the facts of the colonial approach to works of art, and providing people, including Ukrainians, with the subjectivity of culture that they were deprived of earlier. I would like to finally get rid of the feeling that an audit only causes bored yawning amid museum workers, curators, and gallery owners.

I hope that such a trend will result in refusal to promote the outdated messages of Russian exhibitions going forward. As the decolonization movement grows in the European cultural space, a deep reflection over the past mistakes is also taking place. Self-criticism is becoming the norm and is helping to form a healthier worldview and partnerships between countries, Russia's discourse remains deeply colonial, yet, still, its implementation is fully approved in Europe's cultural venues.

In 2021, two exhibitions were being held simultaneously, “The Morozov Collection” at Fondation Louis Vuitton and “Repin” at the Petit Palais, were once again impressive in their magnitude and yet amazing as to why we need such grandeur. The Morozov Collection on the four floors of the Fondation Louis Vuitton told the story of the close cultural ties between Russia and France through the figure of Ivan Morozov, his brilliant education, and his extremely progressive views. Vladimir Putin personally emphasized those close cultural ties before the exhibition’s opening. The exclusivity of such support for art, especially in terms of the current war with Ukraine, could affect the legal decision on the collection’s fate, as part of it, according to Politico, is owned by Putin’s closest ally, the now-sanctioned oligarch Petr Olegovich Aven. However, both the museum-owned part of the exhibition and some of the private collections are protected by the French state and by the guarantees of the cultural institution that took the collection for exhibition. Extensive discussion in the French museum sector ended with the arrest of only two among all exhibited works: a portrait owned by Aven himself, and a painting from a Ukrainian Museum. The paintings’ return to Russia [is explained as](#) “art should be left out of the conflict,” all the while expressing further concern that “private collectors and public institutions are already reluctant to lend to museums in a foreign country.”

According to the exhibition’s concept, Korovin, Konchalovsky, Somov, Larionov, Serov, and Golubkin were supposed to correlate with Renoir, Picasso, Cezanne, Gauguin, Matisse, and Van Gogh. As with the “Red” exhibition and its French curator, Nicola Lucci-Gutnikov, the curator here was also a Frenchwoman named Anne Baldassari. Both were, in fact, intended to ensure the nominal unbiased nature of the process so that it remained unquestioned, while the Russian curators stayed in the wings.

For some reason, the exhibition failed to mention the fate of the collection, despite it being considered common courtesy for such large-scale artistic reconstructions by many museums around the globe. In 1919, Morozov found refuge in Paris, while his collection was nationalized in Russia—that is, actually being taken from him. Perhaps this explains why the patron wanted nothing to do with the great Russian culture, at least in the long run. It’s worth keeping in mind the fate of progressive views in the country where at some point they become redundant and unnecessary. Otherwise, there’s a great ethical paradox.

Isn’t such unconditional support from European curators and intellectuals a contradiction to themselves, a devaluation of previous experience, and already a reinterpreting of collective traumas? Is it possible to take the obsession with showing one’s European kinship as something sincere, given the lack of self-reflection broadcast through these large-scale Russian exhibitions? In the early stages of Russia’s full-scale war with Ukraine, many people were amazed at the extraordinary number of seemingly non-economic ties that a state pursuing such aggressive policies had managed to build. Unlike oil and gas, those ties were quite vague, yet equally strong. It seems that there is still time to realize this and stop nurturing Russian utopias. Otherwise, you may blink and realize that you have missed the moment when you’re engulfed by their utterly false reality.