Cultural Capitalism:
Literature and the Market after Socialism

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EPILOGUE

Anti-Capitalism and the Battle for Art

> *It's time to stop thinking of how to properly and effectively sell oneself—we must learn how to simply give. And then every gesture, even the most minor, can have the broadest possible social impact.*
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> — Chto delat'? collective (2003)[1]

At the end of this study of cultural capitalism in post-Soviet Russia, the question arises: what can this relatively fine-grained examination of 1990s and 2000s literary culture offer to our understanding of culture in the world more broadly? This question, it seems to me, is particularly pressing at this moment. Russia's brutal and unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine would seem to have made devoting so much time and analytical energy to Russian culture suspect, if not altogether reprehensible. But it is not despite, but precisely *because of* the worst developments of today's Russia, that it is essential to study the post-Soviet decades. In order to understand how we got here, we need to pay close attention to the developments of the post-Soviet decades, not least in culture. As I hope the previous chapters have shown, that close attention might have something about the current moment. It might also, as I would like to suggest in the following pages, have important implications for the study of world culture more broadly. Ultimately, I hope this study provides, even for the Anglophone reader, not a window onto an entirely different world, but a defamiliarizing lens through which to better see our own.

In the course of investigating post-Soviet Russia, several of the preceding chapters have gestured towards developments observable in other parts of the world. Indeed, the portrait of cultural capitalism sketched in the preceding pages describes at once a specifically postsocialist problem, and a global one. Insofar as our world *is* a postsocialist world—that is, a world bereft of the political alternatives once offered by the "Second World"—the cultural logic of postsocialism cannot help but be a global logic. Most obviously, many of the developments that have helped shape cultural capitalism in post-Soviet Russia—from bestseller lists to Booker-like

[1] "Chto delat'?": 2. "Пора перестать думать, как следует правильно и эффективно торговать собой—нужно просто научиться дарить. И тогда каждый, пусть даже незначительный, жест может иметь самые широкие общественные последствия. Ведь самое опасное для системы—это противостояние людей, отрицающих потребительскую концепцию удовольствия, людей, способных отойти от цинизма товарно-денежных отношений."

literary prizes to the kinds of audience interactions afforded by LiveJournal and Facebook—are direct imports from the capitalist West, as are the ideology and policies of neoliberalism itself. In this way, cultural capitalism might be seen as part of what Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes call the "imitation imperative," in which the postsocialist world is coerced into mimicking Western capitalism, democracy, and its values more broadly.[2] With cultural capitalism, in this view, the postsocialist world joins a global and increasingly homogenized world culture. But, I hope, it also makes that world culture visible, even legible, in a new way. The accelerated nature of post-Soviet cultural marketization defamiliarizes a process that has elsewhere accreted over long decades. What might be felt simply as "how culture works" in the U.S. or Western Europe is thrown into sharp relief in post-Soviet Russia, clearly marking out the contours of a cultural capitalism that might remain fuzzy and ill-defined elsewhere. The experience of post-Soviet Russia, in other words, shows that cultural capitalism is not simply the "natural condition" of culture (analogous to how liberalism sees capitalism as the "natural condition" of the economy), but a specific mode of culture, a specific cultural logic, that must be perceived, analyzed, and critiqued as such.[3]

Certainly, this project of making cultural capitalism visible is, I hope, one of the contributions this study can make to broader understandings of culture worldwide. But I would like to devote this conclusion to two more ways in which, I think, postsocialist culture might not only contribute to a clearer understanding of global cultural tendencies, but also might provide inspiration for critiquing and resisting those tendencies. The first is that the imitation imperative, as Krastev and Holmes argue, actually leads to liberalism's failure. Not only does the imposition of a system from the outside build resentment, but—more important for our purposes—the imperative to imitate reproduces surface forms while exposing emptiness or manipulability within. Even when the imitator is an eager adopter, as much of the post-Soviet literary world was, its mimicry proliferates forms and practices in such a way that fissures appear where only a smooth exterior had previously been visible. For Krastev and Holmes, the imitation imperative is key to understanding how and why global illiberalism has risen largely

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[2] Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning* (London: Penguin, 2019).
[3] The much derided "end of history" narrative is based on this assumption, as Ellen Meiksins Wood summarizes: "The 'collapse of Communism' in the late 1980s and 1990s seemed to confirm what many people have long believed: that capitalism is the natural condition of humanity, that it conforms to the laws of nature and basic human inclinations, and that any deviation from those natural laws and inclinations can only come to grief" (*The Origins of Capitalism: A Longer View* (New York: Verso, 2017), 1).

out of the postsocialist world—from Viktor Orban's Hungary to Vladimir Putin's Russia to Xi Jinping's China.

As we have seen, when metrics like the bestseller are introduced into the postsocialist context, they are immediately subjected to a whole variety of cynical manipulation, analysis, and aesthetic play. The same happens with the imported literary prize. This is not to say that U.S. bestsellers or the British Booker were ever free of cynical or playful machinations. To the contrary: they have always been subject to jockeying, back-room deals, market manipulations, and crass commercialization. Indeed, the British Booker is famous, at least in part, *as* a scandal machine. And this is the point. Even good faith imitations pick up on and amplify the blemishes of the original, and as further imitations proliferate, they expose not only their own manipulability, but also that of the original. When the imitation reveals itself to be a simulation, an empty husk, available for both playful (mis)appropriation and cynical manipulation, it exposes the fundamental falsehood of the original.

For Krastev and Holmes this is the logical end of the imitation imperative. But it is also a kind of reversal. The imitator becomes the generator of new forms, new approaches. If Yeltsin's 1996 reelection campaign, for instance, needed to borrow from Western political know-how to dig itself out of an all-but-insurmountable deficit, then by 2016, the U.S. right borrowed disinformation techniques (along with the rhetoric of oppressive liberalism) from Putin's Russia to push an unlikely and unqualified demagogue to the U.S. presidency. The illiberalism of Putin's Russia, as the preceding chapters have shown, has found its way into culture through some of the mechanisms of cultural capitalism. The prize system not only allowed the cynical manipulation that won the conspiracy-minded war monger Aleksandr Prokhanov the National Bestseller prize in 2002, it also provided structures that have aided state re-capture of the literary process through the founding of the Big Book award. Zakhar Prilepin, in another example, found success across all metrics of cultural capitalism before publicly praising Stalin, supporting Putin's neoimperialism, and taking up arms against another country's sovereignty. One hopes that such cynical manipulations of cultural capitalism will not go global and the forces of illiberalism elsewhere will not find it so easy to manipulate cultural markets to gain stronger holds over literary and artistic production. But the Russian example shows that the tools are there, that marketized culture is by its very nature manipulable and just as amenable to right-wing nationalism as it has been, in the West, to mainstream neoliberalism.

But, so far at least—for better and for worse— the cultural markets of the West have remained largely dominated by a mainstream neoliberal worldview. The pervasiveness of neoliberalism in Western cultural production is often seen as the outcome of many of the tendencies that have also made appearances in this study of cultural capitalism. Perceiving similar tendencies, Mark Fisher, for instance, diagnosed Anglo-American culture in the first decades of the twenty-first century as dominated by "capitalist realism." For Fisher, capitalist realism is not only culture under the same marketized system of exchange that governs politics and economics. It is the cultural outgrowth of a world in which "there is no alternative" to neoliberal capitalism (recalling Margaret Thatcher), in which "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (a line attributed variously to Fredric Jameson or Slavoj Žižek). "That slogan," writes Fisher, "captures precisely what I mean by 'capitalist realism': the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it." Capitalist realism, for Fisher, is a feature of the ennui—what he diagnosis as the "depressive hedonia"—of the "end of history." Since we had reached the only viable economic and political system, no alternative futures could be imagined in anything approaching good faith. Instead, the imagination was crowded with various catastrophes and apocalypses that we had no ability—or even imaginative apparatus—to stop. Capitalist realism, in this way, is characterized more than anything by "reflexive impotence": the inability and unwillingness to imagine alternatives to the existing order.

Post-Soviet Russia, in contrast, lacks this "reflexive impotence." The accelerated and dramatic marketization of culture traced in the preceding chapters reified cultural capitalism in such a way that it no longer seemed inevitable or natural. But beyond that, the living memory of an alternative system, the constant battles against marketization—lists of "intellectual bestsellers," the International Congress in Defense of the Book, nostalgia for the Soviet Writers Union, the legacies of Soviet censorship and cultural policy—all left their traces on post-Soviet culture in such a way that an anti-capitalist alternative was not only imaginable, but became a prominent feature of Russian literature in the early twenty-first century. In this way, Russia's cultural capitalism was rarely experienced as the "natural condition" of culture by those who found themselves within it. Even those who were most imbricated in the workings of cultural capitalism struggled—often publicly—to find a place within its imperatives, as demonstrated throughout the previous chapters.

By the mid-2000s, a new oppositional movement grew up around explicit opposition to capitalism in culture. That movement was, in many ways, recognizable as a resurrected and reformulated underground. Though significantly diminished by the onslaught of the market, neither the underground, nor the elite poetry often associated with it completely disappeared in the post-Soviet era. In fact, the legacy of the late-Soviet underground lurks in the shadows of much of this book. Its most active denizen, Dmitry Prigov, provided some of the most hilariously insightful analyses of capitalism's takeover of literature. (The bank account in Hamburg discussed in chapter 4, for instance, was his image.) Vladimir Sorokin's scandalous international success is inseparable from his beginnings with Andrei Monastyrskii and the Moscow Conceptualists (also chapter 4). The Andrei Bely Prize, the award most associated with late-Soviet unofficial culture, was dormant but not forgotten in the first post-Soviet decade (chapter 3). And Aleksandr Skidan, a poet who found his first success in the late-Soviet era, continued to work as a stoker—a job associated with late-Soviet poets protecting their artistic autonomy from the system—well into the post-Soviet years (see chapter 2).

The underground's primary form—poetry—helped keep the market at bay. Rarely saleable, and therefore less susceptible to the market's promises, poetry found itself pushed aside more often than overtaken by cultural capitalism (Vera Polozkova, chapter 5, is something of an exception). But underground poetry still managed to eke out an existence through even the leanest post-Soviet years. Much of its survival can be attributed to the extraordinary efforts of individuals from Dmitry Kuz'min—whose Vavilon (discussed in chapter 5) was only one of many institutions he created to bring together, publish, and develop Russia's young poetic talent—to Prigov and other figures such as Elena Shvartz and Arkady Dragomoshchenko from the late-Soviet underground who mentored the next generation, to publishers and creators of intellectual clubs such as Project O.G.I. that provided gathering spaces and refuges from the unpredictable post-Soviet world.

But survival was also facilitated by the world of international grants, fellowships, and residences that funded projects and brought poets into global networks of likeminded artists and writers. Even as elite poetry remained on the edges of cultural capitalism throughout the 1990s, many of the institutions involved in its survival—from the Iowa Writers Workshop to the Open Society Institute—were implicated in the same networks of neoliberal global capitalism that undergirded the mainstream literature studied throughout this volume. By the end of the 1990s, the publishing house of the New Literary Review (Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, or

NLO) became the premier press for new collections of avant-garde poetry. NLO combined the liberal worldview of its founding editor, Irina Prokhorova, with the oligarchic capital of her brother, Mikhail Prokhorov, to create a powerful and uniquely post-Soviet force in the world of post-Soviet poetry. In this way, even literature's most unsaleable corner, by the end of the first post-Soviet decade, was brought under the wing of various organizations that formed recognizable aspects of cultural capitalism.

Inevitably, this is an oversimplification. The story of the various late- and post-Soviet undergrounds is too complex and intricate to be reconstructed fully here. Parts of that story have been told very well elsewhere.[4] But what deserves attention here is the resurgence of that underground in the early to mid 2000s. In the first years of the new millennium a number of post-Soviet writers and thinkers who all traced their roots to the late-Soviet underground fomented the beginnings of a new resistance to cultural capitalism. In the poetics and performance of figures such as Kirill Medvedev and Keti Chukhrov, in periodicals such as *Chto delat'?* and *[Translit]*, the renewed underground began to reformulate itself as an anti-capitalist aesthetic resistance. The strength and focus of this anti-capitalist resurgence would seem to confirm the dominance of cultural capitalism. The new underground, it seemed, formed not against the state, as it had in the Soviet era, but against the market. The market was the new hegemon and the only force in the 2000s strong enough to provide the oppositional energy the underground needed. But beyond that, the new critiques demonstrated just how legible cultural capitalism had become to those within it. "This is how I see the contemporary cultural situation," wrote Kirill Medvedev, one of the earliest voices in this rising chorus of opposition, in 2003:

> A strengthened book business, a bunch of publishers […] using the most unscrupulous tactics and provocative strategies to commercial advantage, playing with the most

[4] See, for instance, Mark Lipovetsky and Klavdia Smola, eds., "Russia — Culture of (Non)Conformity: From the Late Soviet Era to the Present," special issue of *Russian Literature*, Vol. 96–98 (Feb–May 2018); Mark Lipovetsky, et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2021); Fabrizio Fenghi, *It Will Be Fun And Terrifying: Nationalism and Protest in Post-Soviet Russia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2021); Elizabeth Skomp, "Russian Women's Publishing at the Beginning of the 1990s: the Case of the New Amazons," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2006): 85-98; Helena Goscilo, "Introduction," in Svetlana Vasilenko, *Shamara and Other Stories*, ed. Helena Goscilo, trans. Andrew Bromfield (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2000). Marijeta Bozovic's book *Avant-Garde Post-* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2023) deserves special mention. She convincingly shows how the anti-capitalist resurgence takes on the mantel not only of the late-Soviet underground, but of the historical avant-garde. Her analysis and tireless championing of these leftist poets have inspired this epilogue.

> monstrous and to me disgusting ideologies. An inhuman fight for prizes. An endless staging of pseudo-events in literature. Several literary lobbies, carrying on a cruel and primitive struggle for cultural influence. Loathsome speculations by critics and journalists openly serving their masters.[5]

Medvedev rejected the centrality of the market and its cynical manipulation. He refused to participate in any "literary projects organized and financed either by the state or by cultural institutions" or even to give any public readings.[6] He even launched a more comprehensive attack against cultural capitalism more broadly: no publisher should make money reprinting his work, and even more radically, neither should the poet himself. A year later, he renounced his claim to copyright altogether and for five years vowed not to write poetry at all.[7]

In the same years, the newly-formed leftist art collective Chto delat'? (What is to be done?) began publishing a broadsheet periodical. An unsigned mission statement opens the first issue. The collective described Russia's cultural landscape as dominated by consumption and the "cynicism of commodity-monetary relations, [which] pervade society from top to bottom."[8] In this environment, "any ironically playful forms of representation suddenly seem to

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[5] Kirill Medvedev, "Kommiunike," *Sait poeta Kirilla Medvedeva* 22 Sept 2003, accessed 15 Aug 2017: http://kirillmedvedev.narod.ru/comm--.html "окрепший книжный бизнес, кучка издателей, зачастую полуграмотных, издающие уже всё подряд, не разбирая, едва успевая налепить на книгу нужную бирку, использующие в коммерческих интересах самые беспринципные приемы и провокационные стратегии, заигрывающие с самыми чудовищными и отвратительными для меня идеологиями. Нечеловеческая борьба за премии. Бесконечные инсценированные псевдособытия в литературе. Несколько литературных лобби, ведущих жестокую и примитивную борьбу за культурное влияние. Омерзительные спекуляции критиков и журналистов, откровенно служащих хозяину; критиков, либо навязывающий читателю свой недоразвитый полуосознанный культурный мирок, либо проповедующих культурную и иную ксенофобию и псевдорелигиозное мракобесие."

[6] Ibid. "Я отказываюсь от участия в литературных проектах, организуемых и финансируемых как государством, так и культурными инстанциями. […] Я отказываюсь от каких-либо публичных чтений." After five years of abstaining from poetic life, Medvedev returned to the literary scene in 2011, and has since actively published and performed his own poetry, though within the confines of his own publishing ventures and limited public readings organized by friends.

[7] Medvedev, "Manifest ob avtorskom prave," *Sait poeta Kirilla Medvedeva* 22 Sept 2003, accessed 15 Aug 2017: http://kirillmedvedev.narod.ru/manifest.html

[8] "Chto delat'?" *Chto delat'? Gazeta novoi tvorcheskoi formy* No. 1 (2004): 2, accessed 15 Aug 2017: https://chtodelat.org/category/b8-newspapers/c1-1-what-is-to-be-done/ "Потребительская концепция удовольствия"; "цинизм товаро-денежных отношений, пропитавших общество сверху донизу."

be openly indecent […]. The time has come for a 'return to principles.'"[9] For the authors of the manifesto, the first principle is the rejection of capitalism as a mode of producing art:

> It's time to stop thinking of how to properly and effectively sell oneself—we must learn how to simply give. And then every gesture, even the most minor, can have the broadest possible social impact. After all, the most dangerous thing for the system is the opposition of people who reject the consumer conception of pleasure, of people capable of stepping away from the cynicism of commodity-monetary relations.[10]

Their avowedly anti-capitalist aim is similar to Medvedev's: to stand against a dominant commercial "system that so devalues and debases the Word," to find a position for the artist who will "fight for art."[11]

Tellingly, both Medvedev and the Chto delat'? collective begin their manifestos with a diagnosis of the commercialization of contemporary culture. Their critiques describe the lay of the land and open up a front from which this fight might begin. What they see as the cynicism, commodification, and capitalization of culture—the logic of cultural capitalism—is a prerequisite for their own ideological stances. Without this diagnosis of the dominant system, they would not be able to position themselves against it. "The possibility of simply imagining the question 'What is to be done?'," write the authors of Chto delat'?, "appeared not long ago."[12] It was not only the possibility of asking, "What is to be done?" that appeared at the time. The very possibility of perceiving Russian culture as dominated by capitalist exchange came into focus only around this time as well. Though marketization had been a cause for concern throughout the post-Soviet years, it had not yet been seen as a dominant entrenched system against which a new opposition could position itself. But by 2003–2004, the dominance of

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[9] "Chto delat'?": 2. "любые иронически-игровые формы репрезентации вдруг стали казаться откровенно непристойными. Настает время «возвращения к принципам»."
[10] "Chto delat'?": 2. "Пора перестать думать, как следует правильно и эффективно торговать собой—нужно просто научиться дарить. И тогда каждый, пусть даже незначительный, жест может иметь самые широкие общественные последствия. Ведь самое опасное для системы—это противостояние людей, отрицающих потребительскую концепцию удовольствия, людей, способных отойти от цинизма товарно-денежных отношений."
[11] Kirill Medvedev, "Kommiunike." "К системе, настолько девальвирующей и опошляющей Слово, настолько профанирующей его, я не хочу иметь даже косвенного отношения."
[12] "Chto delat'?," 1. "Возможность просто вообразить вопрос 'Что делать?' появилась недавно." The collective's very name, however, alludes to Nikolai Chernyshevky and Vladimir Lenin's works by the same name, suggesting that this is not the first historical moment when the possibility of asking such a question has arisen.

markets, the manipulability of the new institutions, the impotence of critical voices had made cultural capitalism not only perceptible, but central. If cultural life in other parts of the world shared several aspects with Russia's cultural capitalism, the force and newness with which it asserted itself in Russia made it hard to ignore.

It was also tied to politics in a way that was clearly visible and forcefully articulated. Aleksandr Skidan, for instance, began a contribution to the *Chto delat'?* broadsheet with a discussion of the "crisis of representative democracy," which has replaced "politics in the classical sense [with] management and marketing, various technologies of manipulation." Neoliberal policies, imported from the West, had trampled on the public sphere, which in the first years of the Putin presidency was being "squashed before our eyes." But it wasn't just the traditional realms of politics. "The ideology of the market subordinates everything to itself, including cultural production." Anticipating Krastev and Holmes, Skidan writes that all of this—both culture and politics—are part of a "mimetic crisis" that has brought forth a wave of anti-Western sentiment. The imperative to imitate Western political and economic systems, cloaked as "modernization," went hand in hand with "advanced publishers" who "unite commercial and creative interests" into something he called "functional literature," or literature that does nothing but illustrate and serve the status quo.[13]

In his essay, "My Fascism" (2004), Medvedev also took up the connection between the politics of neoliberalism and the culture produced in post-Soviet Russia. The anti-liberal backlash against the breakneck marketization of the 1990s, he wrote, was not simply an economic or political proposition. It was all part of Russia's "sickening aesthetic atmosphere."

> I don't want to draw inane analogies between politics and culture or provide up to the minute cultural and political arguments, but analogies and arguments are inescapable, and so they follow. The parliamentary elections of December 2003 only put the final stamp of reality on tendencies that were already happening in Russian culture and intellectual life at the turn of the century: the nationalists had joined forces with the merely conservative and the outright anti-liberal. What brought them together was their

[13] Aleksandr Skidan, "Tezisy k politizatsii iskusstva," *Chto delat'?*: 3–4.

> shared hatred of a corrupted '90s-era liberalism and its manifestations in politics, economics, and art.[14]

Medvedev's inclusion of art here is important not only because it is central to his own existence as a poet, but also because, for him, the post-Soviet marketization of culture fundamentally changed the social role of the Russian intelligentsia. "The '90s-era Russian liberal intelligentsia had one supreme goal. It wanted to catch up to its Western counterparts."[15] It concentrated on recouping the losses of its Soviet past and joining a globalized culture. But what fell away was the intelligentsia's social responsibility to critique the world of the present. Those who engaged in contemporary culture most often got pulled into the profit-seeking imperative of a booming book business, where the "spirit of economic competition was prioritized over aesthetic concerns. As a result," Medvedev writes, "the concepts of rebellion, marginality, political incorrectness, much like literature itself, were suddenly on the verge of total devaluation."[16] For Medvedev, Skidan, and the Chto delat'? collective, the politics and economics of neoliberal capitalism are inseparable from the marketization of culture. And that marketization led to the homogenization not only of culture, but also of the public sphere. Art at its best should foster the creation of minority positions; it should be a space for "all the forms of Utopia that no one knows about yet, whose time has not yet come, or has already passed."[17] But cultural markets fail to support such minority positions and instead foster a smooth surface of "functional" aesthetics in which "social life, with all its antagonisms and internal conflicts of interests, is stripped away, sublimated."[18] Most alarming, for Skidan and Medvedev, was how this homogenized culture of neoliberal capitalism suppressed dissent, supported the status quo, and ultimately served Russia's rising power vertical. Both used the term "fascisoid" ("*fashizoidnyi*") to describe contemporary aesthetics, discerning a dangerous, reactionary tendency in Russian culture that many preferred to ignore, at least until February 2022, and that most of us still prefer to ignore in our own cultures.

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[14] Kirill Medvedev, "Moi fashizm," *sait poeta kirilla medvedeva*, 10 Sep 2004. Web. Accessed 22 Jul 2022: http://kirillmedvedev.narod.ru/; trans. as "My fascism," in *It's No Good. Poems. Essays. Actions*, trans. Keith Gessen, et al. (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2012): 115.
[15] Medvedev, "Moi fashizm"; trans. as "My fascism," *It's No Good*, 117.
[16] Medvedev, "Moi fashizm"; trans. as "My fascism," *It's No Good*, 119–20.
[17] Boris Groys, "Iskusstsvo v epokhu demokratii," *Chto delat'?*: 14.
[18] "Социальность, с ее антагонизмами и борьбой интересов, оказывается "снятой", "сублимированной" Skidan, "Tezisy k politizatsii iskusstva," 3.

Beyond diagnosing the situation, these thinkers and writers, against the global trend of "reflexive impotence," also imagined alternatives. Indeed, they felt the responsibility both to advocate for and enact a different way of creating art, creating meaning, against the dominance of cultural capitalism. "The coming changes," writes the Chto delat'? collective, confident that positive changes would come, "wholly depend on our position and on the projection of our ideas into the future."[19] Their confidence in their ability to project ideas and alternative positions into the future was directly connected to their perception and clear articulation of the harms of cultural capitalism. Frenzied marketization, the sense of perpetual crisis, and ongoing public debates gave the lie to neoliberalism's claim to capitalism as a "natural state" or its insistence on a lack of alternatives. But beyond that, the recent history of socialism, within the living memories of even the youngest members of these groups, meant that in post-Soviet Russia, it was quite a bit easier to imagine the end of capitalism than the end of the world. Indeed, the hybrid position of postsocialist subjects made alternatives both imaginable and urgent. Postsocialist subjects of the 2000s were not yet of the neoliberal order but were no longer socialist; they occupied an inbetweenness akin to Homi Bhabha's vision of the postcolonial subject as both "less than one and double."[20] Their "second world" had disintegrated, but they didn't yet fit into the "first"; they were fully part of neither while occupying both. The instability of this inbetweenness could be both wrenching and generative. Unlike the subjects of Fisher's capitalist realism, postsocialist subjects displayed the ability to see beyond the unquestioned consensus of the West, and could even conceive various alternative visions, which derived directly from the hybridity of the postsocialist position.

A key aspect of these alternative visions has been rethinking the notion of artistic autonomy as such. In order for art to do its job, it needs to shed its dependence on the market. But the search for artistic autonomy also carries the danger of furthering the social atomization that is often one of neoliberalism's most destructive tendencies. Artistic autonomy should not mean the isolation of art from social concerns, but should create solidarities that resist "the destruction of the 'social state' and the victory of the neoliberal model of social organization […] that paralyzes all social connections and fully atomizes society."[21] The need to separate from the

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[19] "Предстоящие изменения целиком зависят от нашей позиции, от проекции наших идей в будущее." "Chto delat'?," 1.
[20] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), introduction and *passim*.
[21] "разрушение "социального государства" и победа неолиберальной модели устройства общества, основанной на апологии свободной конкуренции всех со всеми, парализует все социальные связи,

market must not be confused with a hermeticism that seals off art from life. Zones of autonomy should be both collective and fluid, as Chto delat'? writes in an essay arguing for "Autonomy as a space of action."[22] Collectives such as Chto delat'? aim to be just such zones of artistic autonomy. The journal *[Translit]* launched by Pavel Arseniev in 2005 provided another such outlet.

Arseniev's "Poem of Autonomy (and also of Atomization)" (2008) expresses this tension. The poem was inspired by a trumped-up fire code violation that temporarily shut down the independent European University in St. Petersburg and it begins with a half-ironic invitation to "Return to your classrooms, / they are protected from fire." But the second stanza gives fire safety another twist:

На всякий пожарный следовало бы
сигнализацию встроить и в тело.
Ведь пожар в одной голове
всегда может перекинуться на другую,
и тогда полыхнет весь город.
Для этого-то и нужны —
качественная изоляция индивидов,
система пожарной тревоги,
самый простой телефонный номер,
также вероятно, призванный напоминать об одиночестве
и невозможности солидарности.

Just in case, it would be prudent
to install fire alarms in your bodies.
For a fire in one head
can always jump to another,
and then the whole city will catch fire.

полностью атомизируя общество." "Avtonomiia kak prostranstvo deistviia," *Chto delat'? Zony avtonomii*, No. 4 (2005): 2.

[22] Надо быть способным все время негативно оценивать свою собственную компромисность, границы своей автономии, которые должны постоянно переосмысляться/завоевывается. "Avtonomiia kak prostranstvo deisviia," 2.

Hence the need for —
the qualitative isolation of individuals,
A fire-alarm system,
A simple three-digit telephone number,
Probably also meant to remind us of our loneliness
And the impossibility of solidarity.

Arseniev performed the poem at the Street University of St. Petersburg, an outdoor alternative to the institutional isolationism the poem critiques. In this way, the poem navigates the difficulties of autonomy under cultural capitalism. It resists capitalization through its open performance, while at the same time critiquing the autonomy of the ivory tower. In later works, Arseniev emphasizes the materiality of the word in order to at once escape the market and transform poetry into a collective experience. (See fig. 6.1) Such materialized poetry directly counters the commodity trap (discussed in chapter 1) according to which, to recall Boris Arvatov, "art works turn into market goods," and the artist "learns to see his work as something valuable in itself, self-contained, and accordingly changes the devices and forms of work. The painter no longer paints on walls—he now takes a piece of canvas and frames it."[23] By tearing poetry off the page and reintegrating it into the world, Arseniev rejects commodification and the market while, with the very same gesture, insisting on art's continuity with life.

Fig 6.1. Pavel Arseniev's installation of Vsevelod Nekrasov's poem "Moscow is Pleasing" ("Nravitsia Moskva") in the Tretiakovskii Passage, a glitzy center of Moscow consumer culture (2017)

Medvedev's renouncing of copyright also distances him from the market, while his continued online and offline presence (including performances with his band Arkady Kots) carves a fluid zone of autonomy that he has been constantly in the process of reevaluating and

[23] "Произведения становятся рыночным товаром … Живописец больше не расписывает стен, — он берет теперь кусок полотна и обрамляет его рамкой." Boris Arvatov, *Iskusstvo i proizvodstvo. Sbornik statei*, eds. Dzhon Roberts and Aleksei Penzin (Moscow: V-A-C Press, 2018 [1926]), 27.

renegotiating.[24] From such zones of autonomy/solidarity, writers have articulated an array of positions, too diverse to cover here. Instead of attempting an exhaustive survey, I highlight two broad tendencies that I find particularly worthy of attention. The first combines theoretical positions articulated by Skidan and Medvedev to undermine the value of meritocracy as a centerpiece of capitalist aesthetics. For Skidan, the most troubling tendency of the new capitalist aesthetics is its totalizing ambitions, which first must be broken. Art should activate "interruptions, the destruction of aesthetic illusions" and prevent "those illusions from hardening into a totality."[25] The vision of art as disruption comes from the Formalists (especially Viktor Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarization) and the avant-garde and its decedents across Europe. But what Skidan envisions goes beyond a disruption of smooth surfaces.

> The disposition of capitalism, when everything can be converted into everything else, everything is subject to replacement, activates a longing for something absolute, that cannot be turned into a commodity. All totalitarian structures play on that longing, from religious sects to political extremists, they offer that absolute from on high. The role of the intellectual, the artist, is to be found in the deconstruction of these despotic discourses offered from on high with their pretenses toward representation of the absolute, and in their place—to search for sites where the dimension of the transcendental or the sacred can tear through the horizontal positioning of values, pointing in a direction that does not fit into the limited (capitalist) economy.[26]

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[24] For instance, after he renounced his claim to copyright, a prestigious Moscow publisher put out a book of his poems called *Kirill Medvedev: Texts Published without the Author's Knowledge* (*Kirill Medvedev: Teksty izdannye bez vedoma avtora*), causing him to consider whether "A large established publisher canceled the pretensions of the poet M. to a particularly marginal-independent-rejected position, unequivocally putting him in his place in the cultural context and once again demonstrating the capitalist system's ability to absorb within itself many ideologically antagonistic intentions." (Medvedev, "Na vykhod knigi, 'Kirill Medvedev: Teksty izdannye bez vedoma avtora'," *Kriticheskaia massa*, No. 1 (2006). Web. Accessed 15 Jul 2002: https://magazines.gorky.media/km/2006/1/na-vyhod-knigi-kirill-medvedev-teksty-izdannye-bez-vedoma-avtora.html.)

[25] Skidan, "Tezisy k politizatsii iskusstva," 2.

[26] "Диспозиция капитализма, когда все конвертируется во все, все подвергается замещению, активизирует тоску по чему-то абсолютному, что не может быть обращено в товар. На этой тоске играют все тоталитарные структуры, от религиозных сект до политических экстремистов, они спускают этот абсолют сверху. Роль интеллектуала, художника заключается в деконструкции этих спускаемых сверху деспотических дискурсов, претендующих не репрезентацию абсолюта, но вместе с тем – в поиске точек, где измерение трансцендентного, или священного, разрывает горизонтальную рядоположенность ценностей, указывая в направлении того, что не вписывается в ограниченную (капиталистическую) экономику. – Подобно эротизму, смеху, бесцельной трате

Art's mission, then, in the face of cultural capitalism is two-fold. To fight the totalizing illusion of capitalist aesthetics, revealing social antagonisms, and also to find something transcendent, something that gestures beyond the limited vision imposed by the capitalist economy. It is no small task, and though Skidan points in a few promising directions, perhaps the most generative idea comes from Medvedev's idea of "democratic art."

For Medvedev, "democratic art" is not simply popular art, in fact, it aspires to overcome any distinctions between mass and elite, high and low. It is instead an approach to art that attacks the very center of capitalist aesthetics: the notions of success and meritocracy. It is an art, in Medvedev's words "that believes, as existentialism also did, that people are nothing but dirt, that they are nauseating, and yet has faith in them." It is an anti-meritocracy that finds the human not in achievement, but in compassion and solidarity. Medvedev does not deny that "intellect, talent, and education are given to some," but that does not make them fundamentally better or more deserving of social goods. In fact, it gives them the responsibility to "find and proclaim our commonality and equality, to find the language for this and give it to those who have it not."[27] This anti-meritocratic stance comes out of the experience of socialist humanism and offers a glimpse of the transcendence that Skidan sees as missing amidst the atomization of neoliberal society and aesthetics. Medvedev's best poems do just that. Beginning with mundane experiences and trains of thought, they pull the reader along, often through apparent non sequiturs, to find cracks in the smooth surface of reality. The highs and lows of post-Soviet existence are invoked, neoliberal capitalism is often critiqued, and subtly, very quietly, the critique leads to a form of transcendence.

This device is perhaps most literalized in his poem that begins "I really like when / a series of arches in Moscow run / one after the other / creating their own kind of tunnel / out of arches" ("Mne ochen' nravitsia kogda / neskol'ko podvoroten idut podrida, / odna za drugoi, / obrazuia tem samym svoego roda tonnel' / iz povoroten").[28] The architectural combination creates an apparently smooth (and pleasing) surface out of fragments. Soon, however, the narrator is distracted by a passerby whom he recognizes as an acquaintance from school.

или жертвоприношению Батая, которые он рассматривает как фундаментальные, неустранимые потребности человека." Skidan, "Tezisy k politizatsii iskusstva," 3–4.

[27] Kirill Medvedev, "Moi fashizm,"; trans. as "My fascism," *It's No Good*, 141–42.

[28] Kirill Medvedev, *Vsë plokho* (Moscow: OGI, 2002): 57. Trans. modified from Kirill Medvedev, *It's No Good: poems / essays / actions*, ed. Keith Gessen (Brooklyn: n + 1 / Ugly Duckling Presse, 2012), 40.

с тех пор каждый раз проходя мимо этого сборного тоннеля,
я вспоминаю
некоторых моих одноклассниц,
[…]
красивые девушки,
поступившие в Финансовую Академию
или вышедшие замуж за богатых кавказцев —
тогда было
такое время —
они почему-то были уверены,
что нужно сначала научиться
обеспечивать себя —
то есть научиться зарабатывать деньги,
или удачно выйти замуж
и только потом уже
заниматься тем, к чему у тебя есть
природная склонность —
наукой, например, искусством или семьёй —
я не знаю,
кто их научил этому,
вполне возможно,
что это было тогда не просто поветрие,
а что-то тогда в самом воздухе
были разлиты
эти убийственные идеалы —

from then on, every time I pass by that composite tunnel
I remember
a few of the girls from school
[…]
beautiful girls

who enrolled in the Financial Academy
or got married to some wealthy caucasian;
there was
a time when
they were certain, for some reason,
that before anything else they had to figure out
how to provide for themselves
that is
how to make money
or, if they were lucky, get married;
only then
could you concern yourself with what you were
really interested in
academics, for example, or art, or family,
I don't know
who taught them that;
it's possible that this wasn't just a breezy trend,
but that these murderous ideals
were poured into
the very air of the time[29]

Upon consideration, the apparently smooth surface of the culture in which he was raised reveals its cracks, its inner emptiness, through which these "murderous ideals" waft in. It was the tunnel, he realizes, without articulating why, that evoked a kind of existential chill, a "knowledge / that lies like a lump / in my soul" ("znanie / kotoroe lezhit komom / e menia na dushe").[30] And that existential chill leads to his thoughts on the meritocratic imperative that was in "the very air of the time." He soon considers that he followed a different path, that he is unemployed, that he does not fit in to either the social hierarchies of his school friends, or society at large, and he is overcome by a new feeling.

[29] Medvedev, *Vse plokho*, 57–58; trans. modified from Medvedev, *It's No Good*, 40-41.
[30] Medvedev, *Vse plokho*, 61; trans. modified from Medvedev, *It's No Good*, 44.

я очень удивлён тому
что всё
так
получилось;
мне даже немного страшно
от этого;
я не могу понять,
почему я чувствую себя
таким счастливым;
самым счастливым
из них из всех:
из всех —

I am surprised
that it all
worked out
like this
I'm even a little terrified by it
I cannot understand
why I should feel
so happy
the happiest
of them all,
of everyone[31]

The cracks in society's facade have revealed the space in between, but that space turns out to be not only the emptiness through which murderous ideals have wafted in, but also a space which allows for the rethinking of value systems.

When the tunnel resolves into a series of arches, accepted hierarchies no longer need to be maintained. The composite tunnel is revealed to be a construct, and a mental construct at that—one that comes together only as the observer wills it to. For Medvedev's narrator—and

[31] Medvedev, *Vse plokho*, 61; trans. modified from Medvedev, *It's No Good*, 44.

this is essential—the composite tunnel with its smooth surface is pleasing, while its breakdown brings something more ambiguous, "the image / of some delightful, ruinous chill / of breathing a cool freedom" ("predstavlenie / o kakom-to vesëlom gibel'nom kholodke, / dyshashchei prokhladnoi svobode").[32] The smooth surface of society under neoliberal capitalism, especially as oil prices and Putin-era stability policies brought a new outward safety and shine to urban life, appears quite acceptable, even pleasing. And indeed, the myth of meritocracy itself—perhaps Medvedev's most frequent target—has proven to be quite an attractive ideology the world over. But seen from a slightly different angle, the surface reveals itself to be a mental construct, a composite built on false perception. The realization brings a new freedom, but it is a chilly one. The comfort of a smooth surface gives way to the need to find (and fight for) one's own values. For Medvedev's narrator, this new freedom, while chilly, brings unexpected happiness.

[32] Medvedev, *Vse plokho*, 60; trans. Medvedev, *It's No Good*, 43.