

Solntsetsvety and Denis Ichitovkin

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Between Rebellion and Revolution? The Self-Affirmation of Art in Central and
Eastern Europe 1945–1989–2022
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I have selected these two artists for my presentation—specifically, the Belarusian collective Solntsetsvety and an individual artist from Saint Petersburg—because their practices are central to my own research and, I believe, of wider scholarly interest. Virtually no information about them exists in English, so I am uniquely positioned to introduce their work to a broader audience.

1. The Solntsetsvety Group

All information about Solntsetsvety in this paper is drawn from the sole Russian-language article available online and from a series of personal interviews with one of the group's co-founders, Anton Kryvulia.

Because there is no established definition, I characterize Solntsetsvety's activity as a form of **provincial activism** (Fig. 1). Many members would reject that label; instead, they conceive their practice as an existence “outside of place,”¹ echoing Alexei Yurchak's analysis in *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*². Yurchak argues that late-Soviet collectives such as the Nekrorealists and Mitki emerged in reaction to their surrounding reality long before their activities were recognized as artistic practice. This distinguishes them from the performance and action art that appeared a decade later in Russia.

*The actions of the Nekrorealists, Mitki, and other similar late-Soviet collectives arose as a direct response to the surrounding reality and its modes of existence — only much later taking on a recognizable form as an artistic practice. In this respect, they differ fundamentally from the artistic practices that emerged in Russia a decade later and came to be defined as performance art and actionism.*³

Because our seminar — “Between Rebellion and Revolution? Art's Self-Assertion in Central and Eastern Europe, 1945–1989–2022” — focuses on performative practices, I will frame Solntsetsvety's activities in terms of contemporary actionism and performance.

¹ I am translating word for word, I have not found the exact terminology in English..

² Yurchak, Alexey: *Everything was Forever, Until it was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, Moscow, 2014

³ Ebd., p. 485

Historical Context

All activity took place in Minsk during the impoverished, chaotic 1990s. After Lukashenko's rise to power in 1994, the city center was a construction site surrounded by literal ghettos; there were no cafés, bars, or clubs. Teenagers gathered in abandoned bunkers, construction sites, building entrances, and sewer shafts. For an 18-year-old Belarusian man facing mandatory military service, the only alternative was psychiatric hospitalization. It was in such a mental institution that the founding members of Solntsetsvety first met—and from there everything began (Fig. 2).

Origins and Structure

Founded in 1991, Solntsetsvety—literally “sun flowers”—represented the unity of sun and flower (Fig. 3). The collective comprised six autonomous “agglomerates”: Batmans of Big Ukraine; Rattle Symptom; Magic Unicellular Music; Sybarites; Moss; and Psychedelic Sausage. Each operated under distinct protocols, employing divergent generative, compositional, and performative methods, yet all activities were conceived as facets of a single conceptual project. Over time, roughly one hundred participants were involved. Although the group once maintained an extensive online archive, it has been offline for two years and remains uncared for, as the artists lament.

Key Performances

One of Solntsetsvety's earliest events convened approximately sixty strangers atop an abandoned tank; unfortunately, no documentation survives. Another seminal action, titled **“In the Pipe,”** was announced in the newspaper's free classifieds. Participants assembled at a bus terminus and were guided by a figure named Agathon through fields and forests. Along the way, he narrated improvised texts describing mundane objects in mystical terms. Upon reaching a sewer outlet, attendees encountered performers producing strange sounds—an intentionally disorienting ritual that blurred the boundary between guide and environment, creating a collective experience of mystery.

Members of the Solntsetsvety group actively engaged in what Alexei Yurchak describes as the practice of “being in the space outside of place.” In his analysis of late-Soviet life, Yurchak identifies this principle—not merely physical displacement but a deliberate stance of existing “outside”—as the central mode by which most Soviet citizens negotiated their relationship to the system. Solntsetsvety consciously harnessed this principle in their artistic practice. They ritualized their actions, developed a distinctive poetic-musical language, and staged processions and events whose announcements appeared in whatever public media were accessible. In doing so, they effectively created their own audience—a fluid public in which the boundaries between acquaintances, friends, and strangers were intentionally blurred. Within this “space outside of place,” both participants and performers achieved a form of freedom: the freedom simply to be outside.

It is evident that this stance of “being outside” did not conform to the conventional, binary model of political engagement—as did the position of dissidents—and therefore was not recognized by its practitioners as a political act. Yet this did not prevent it from producing profoundly political effects: an invisible deterritorialization of the system from within, thereby undermining its foundational structures.⁴

The group operated with almost no financial resources. Most members held menial jobs that provided just enough income for inexpensive food but left them with ample free time. Agathon sold tights, Lyosha Hockey sewed stuffed monkeys at home (children’s toys for a small company), and Anton Kryvulia worked as a parking attendant. Whatever they created was recorded only when an outsider happened to have a camera, so much of their activity survives today solely through oral recollections.

Reception

It is evident that Solntsetsvety received no support from curators, critics, or sizeable audiences — indeed, Belarus at the time lacked any institutional art infrastructure. Many attendees at their events greeted the group with open hostility and aggression.

⁴ Ebd., p. 472

The sparse contemporary Belarusian press coverage survives only in dismissive snippets, for example:

“Then Solntsetsvety came out and began to cram themselves onto the stage with a deafening noise... they produced unbelievably long, boring racket...”⁵

“Listening to their music is like regarding wallpaper as a work of art.”⁶

“Playing guitar like that is akin to hammering nails under a microscope.”⁷
usw.

The Fate of the Solntsetsvety Group

By the early 2000s, group members had become actively involved in Belarusian political life and were united in direct opposition to President Lukashenko. They participated in post-election demonstrations, and in 2006 they maintained a protest tent encampment in central Minsk — even staging a concert there. In 2010, they released an album as an artistic statement on the Belarusian presidential election that year.

Between 2011 and 2014, the Solntsetsvety movement effectively disbanded: some members grew into adulthood, others passed away, and several emigrated from Belarus. In virtually any other country, the history of this group and their creative output would be more than enough material for multiple exhibitions. In Belarus, however, they went entirely unnoticed — talented young people caught in a hopeless situation, simply born in the wrong place at the wrong time.

2. Denis Ichitovkin

Ichitovkin operates in a very different temporal and political context — no longer the late-Soviet era, but the schizophrenic-postmodern state of Russia from 2014 to 2023. This postmodern state is not a Hobbesian Leviathan; rather, it produces a narrative whose very essence is to perpetuate an endless stream of continual recoding. What I find especially

⁵ Troickiy, A. In the Artikel of Anton Serenkov
<https://rutracker.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t=5269636>

⁶ Ebd.

⁷ Ebd.

compelling is Denis Ichitovkin's position as an artist who remains living and working in Russia — his very presence and practice constitute a form of opposition.

Mimicry is the wrong term, for it implies a binary logic. A crocodile does not pretend to be a log, and a chameleon does not pretend to be the colour of its environment. The Pink Panther does not pretend to be someone else or imitate anyone; it merely paints the world in its own hue — pink on pink — and in doing so becomes that world.⁸

Denis Ichitovkin is an artist who does not “act” in the conventional sense, yet through his very inaction he exerts a powerful effect. His work never speaks overtly; it hints at meaning in a quietly poetic way. Born in the Urals, he today divides his time between his hometown of Nevyansk and St. Petersburg. In St. Petersburg he lives and works in a communal apartment (*kommunalka*)—similar to a shared flat but governed by its own unique rules—which serves as both his publicly accessible studio and living space.

Ichitovkin is best described as a painter whose style oscillates between plain realism and what might be called psychedelic realism, though he adamantly refuses any labels.

His artistic trajectory is firmly academic: he first attended art school, then studied in the Faculty of Monumental Painting at the Russian Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg, and subsequently completed postgraduate studies there. One of the most formative experiences in his educational practice was a field expedition. In 1999—after his third year of study—he accompanied his professor to a temple to copy frescoes using tempera on casein glue. His professor was deeply committed to advancing traditional techniques, a dedication that discouraged many students from joining the expedition; of the eight who were invited, only two ultimately participated.

The conditions were extremely harsh. It took an hour's walk to reach the temple, which lay five kilometres away, where we copied frescoes. We lived in a wooden cabin with no amenities and no shower. Each morning we walked to the site and worked from 8 a.m.

⁸ Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 2002: 11.

until dark — often as late as 10 p.m.⁹

The workflow proceeded as follows: first they restored the fresco, then they deliberately scraped it away to create a textured surface — effectively producing a form of semi-sculpture. To illustrate the concept: if working with Greek sculpture, one would carve a conventional statue complete with hands, and then deliberately remove the hands to achieve the desired effect (Fig. 4).

All of this disciplined practice and study deeply shaped his own work. Ichitovkin is extraordinarily sensitive to texture—smooth in some areas, thick in others—employing the techniques of the Old Masters, particularly those of Venetian painters such as Titian, Carpaccio, and Bellini. His process involves layering paint twice, rubbing it down, and then applying a glaze. A single painting by Ichitovkin can take anywhere from one hour to three years to complete. He is an exceptionally slow artist, and it is precisely this slowness and meticulous attention to detail that allow him to create an entirely different spatial and temporal dimension (Fig. 5). This “other space and time”—the space of being outside—mirrors the mode of social existence characteristic of late socialism (mid-1950s through the late-1980s), as exemplified by the Solntsetsvety group.

In Soviet art, only the grand, the monumental, and the dynamic were considered valid subjects for depiction. Reality had to be portrayed in its “revolutionary development.”

*The point here is not merely Stalin’s distinctive turn of phrase—one that even the author of the Bible might envy. Rather, it is the teleological specificity of Marxist thought that compels us to subsume every concept and object, without exception, under a predetermined goal: to correlate them with that goal and to define them by it.*¹⁰

⁹ Ichitovkin, D. Personal interview with the author, January 18, 2023.

¹⁰ The essay “What Is Socialist Realism?” by Andrei Sinyavsky was first published abroad under his pseudonym Abram Tertz. He was subsequently arrested for its publication. At the same time, the writer Yuli Daniel was also detained for publishing his works under the pseudonym Nikolai Arzhak. The trial of Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel is another story entirely. Here, I am quoting from the Russian version of the essay, which was written in Moscow in 1957 but never officially published—it circulated only in samizdat (unofficial underground copies). (p. 6)

*Who, if not the Party and its Leader, knows best what kind of art we need? After all, it is the Party that guides us toward our goal according to every rule of Marxism-Leninism, for the Party lives and works in constant contact with God. Consequently, in the Party—and in its foremost figure—we possess the most experienced and wisest mentor, competent in all matters: industry, linguistics, music, philosophy, painting, biology, and so forth. This is our commander, ruler, and high priest, in whose words doubting is as sinful as questioning the Creator’s will. These are some of the aesthetic and psychological prerequisites required of anyone who seeks to grasp the mystery of Socialist Realism.*¹¹

It is interesting that these very same ideas were not only prevalent among professors from the 1950s through the 1980s, but remain relevant even today.¹² But for Ichitovkin, the central subject is everyday life itself — simple, viscous, and seemingly uneventful. He prefers to paint abandoned interiors and emptiness. He draws inspiration from ordinary existence, from the quotidian: a frozen moment of routine. Scenes that countless people pass by each day without noticing anything of value — yet our lives are composed of these overlooked minutiae. But is everyday life truly so simple and uneventful?

He also paints interior scenes that include people. Who else could he ask to pose? Only his mother or grandmother agree — they consent but don’t really understand his work. His mother often says, “Why bother with all this? Paint a portrait of Putin instead — you’ll become famous! Paint flowers or cityscapes.”

One of his most recent works, exhibited in St. Petersburg galleries in 2022, is titled **“Welkam”** — a phonetic rendering of “Welcome” in Russian.

¹¹ Ebd., S. 9

¹² I cite the following video as an example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3dWpownMfs>

This features one of Denis Ichitovkin’s professors, Professor A. K. Krylov. The footage was recorded in June 2022—three months after the start of the war. In it, Professor Krylov continues to expound on the supposed uniqueness of the “Russian spirit” and Russian Christianity.

Although Ichitovkin himself is religious, he has always profoundly disagreed with Professor Krylov. Denis told me that he frequently criticized Krylov even as the professor muttered incessantly—recording videos around the clock—and maintained significant influence within Russia’s art academy and broader art community. “He always suspected everyone of being either KGB agents or homosexuals,” Ichitovkin recalled.

— Personal interview with the author, January 18, 2023.

The message Ichitovkin shared with me after our interview was:

Greetings from terrible Russia. It is better to be an artist than a soldier. It is better to paint than to kill.

Thank you for your attention.

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Figures

Figure 1

Solntsetsvety — *I Love You* (video documentation, 1998).

Source: <https://youtu.be/i-5CRMy5i8k>



Figure 2

Department of Neuroses

Photograph, 1992

© Anton Kryvulia



Figure 3

Logo of the Solntsetsvety group

© Anton Kryvulia



Figure 4

Copy of the fresco from the Church of the Transfiguration of the Lord in the village of Bolshiye Vyazyomy.

Paper, tempera; 120 × 120 cm

© Denis Ichitovkin



Figure 5

Good Morning (The Last Hero)

Oil on canvas; 110 × 100 cm; 2018

© Denis Ichitovkin



Figure 6

After the Work

64.5 × 54 cm; 2009

© Denis Ichitovkin



Figure 7

Welcome!(Велкам!)

100 × 100 cm; 2022

© Denis Ichitovkin

