

# SENSORY UTOPIA IN THE TIMES OF “CULTURAL REVOLUTION”: ON ART, PUBLIC SPACE, AND THE MORAL ONTOLOGY OF CLASS

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**Growing out of the history of social, psychological, and moral-philosophical delineations of class in former USSR, the tension between two aesthetic/ethical stances was brought to a particularly stark relief, and given a new interpretation, in a recent contestation of public space in a mid-size industrial Russian city. The article explores how the intellectualist and, especially, the dystopic mode of engagement with the world is juxtaposed with the “sensory utopia” sensibility that asserts not only the givenness but the goodness and the necessity of sensory and emotional embeddedness in one’s physical and social reality, as well as the obligation to strive for and to defend the right to uncomplicated pleasures. Instead of condemning the latter as reactionist recourse to “simpler pasts” growing out of traumas of postsocialism, I suggest exploring it as a phenomenon in its own right, a cultural resource, and an optimistic ground for the development of new urban, civic, and secular identities and collectivities.**

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*Take measures to organize people’s leisure and the cleanliness of the territory they live on—there, it is all the [Russian] national idea you will ever need  
Aleksandr Dolgin, “Culturing the Space of the Everyday”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> All Russian-language sources are in author’s translation.

The materials presented in this paper were not a “focus” of my study. In 2009–2011, I set forth to study how my peers, median-income Russian urbanites born in the 1970s, understand situations of uncertainty and contingency and, possibly, to trace how their present-day worldviews reflect the tectonic splits in the regimes of value that were the historical conditions of their (and my) socialization. My study of uncertainty gradually focused on the ethics and experience of articulation/symbolization and their role in subjectivity and agency. This paper, therefore, does not offer an in-depth exploration of politics or aesthetics of urban space, but is an invitation to think about them in terms of the local, historically and culturally contingent, problematic of the relation between body, representation, and experience, as well as of the issues of moral ontology and class.

I chose Perm’ because I knew the city well and because it suited my self-imposed criterion of being more or less a “typical” Russian urban center in such a way that its geo-imaginary position was equally remote from the capitals and from “deep Russia.”<sup>2</sup> Twenty-six Permiaks participated in the study, among whom six to ten individuals could be identified as “key informants.”<sup>3</sup> The main body of data for the project came from ten months of participant observation of their everyday lives and from over one hundred hours of recordings of unprompted or minimally guided conversations which happened as they happened—in homes, hospitals, workplaces, city streets, and the like. In the present article, the voices of my friends-in-the-field are echoed by voices from Internet forums.

Perm’ turned into an arena of great turmoil starting in about 2008. The formerly inconspicuous city became known throughout and beyond Russian borders (see *New York Times* coverage, Olaf-Jones 2011) when a state-sponsored managerial team attempted to rebrand the city as “the cultural capital of Europe” through a wide-reaching reorganization of cultural industries. The political manifesto of the project (Gladkikh et al. 2011) declared local cultural industries structurally and ideologically obsolete. The goal of this “cultural revolution” was to deploy sophisticated governance of cultural resources in order to harness the power of artistic expression, creativity, and aesthetic pluralism and thus to bring economic prosperity, public awareness, and the joys of “modern” and “global” cultural consumption to the post-Soviet populations.

This shift is significant in light of postsocialist developments in the field of aesthetics and power. Perm’s cultural revolution was, in some sense, as much an attempt to rebrand the city as it was a rebranding of *kul’turnost’*, the “culturedness” ideals of Soviet civilization. In the former USSR, cultural production was divided between “high” and “low” sets of aesthetic canons, competencies, and predilections, which were recognized as measures of social distinction and markers of class, and circumscribed the process of “civilizing” Soviet populations (see Kelly and Volkov 1998; Kelly 2001; Rivkin-Fish 2009). The cultural capital of culturedness lost much of its value in the years after perestroika, when people were trying to adapt themselves to the new significance of

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<sup>2</sup> Today the city population approaches one million. For the history and patterns of urbanization in Perm’ Krai, see Rogers (2009).

<sup>3</sup> All names and sometimes occupations have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

private property, consumerism, and other social and symbolic changes. The influence of intelligentsia, the main possessor and guardian of culturedness, had also declined (Oushakine 2009). Echoing the ideological/didactic Soviet will to improve, the Perm' Project managers disavowed culturedness by associating it with a certain set of "obsolete" aesthetic ideals, but resurrected the hierarchical spirit of culturedness by promoting the significance of cultural capital in general and by stressing the importance, and hence the value, of what they saw as new, global, and innovative approaches to art. In a very Soviet way, the demand to enjoy this "contemporary" art was imposed through a non-democratic process onto the city population in order to elevate, refine, and, in this particular case, to globalize.

Innovations were meant to shake up the foundation of the late-Soviet pyramid of culturedness comprised of the sufficiently "cultured" yet mass consumer products in the lines of realism and classicism—Pushkin and Mayne Reid, Tchaikovsky and Aivazovsky, Soviet cinematic hits, sports, checkers, and strolls in the park. And while the resurrection of the social significance and visibility of cultural capital was not inimical to the interests of all intelligentsia strata, the attempt to "rebrand" culturedness was protested by many local professionals and enthusiasts of the cultural industries. The newcomers, I was told, force-sell shoddy, obsolete, and highly unpopular artworks at a high cost to both public and private funds. The revolution was not a revolution but a hostile slash-and-burn, grab-and-leave takeover, fitting into the broader phenomenon of "raiderism" (wherein Russian provincial estates are appropriated by force by capital giants), or a feat of financial and political opportunism (see Leibovich and Shushkova 2011).

In the controversy that ensued, both expert camps, the old-time builders of local cultural capital and the revolutionaries, publicized their views of what should constitute a rightful and worthy "aesthetic regime" (Mattioli n.d.) in Perm' with an eye towards "objective"—expert—criteria: up-to-date versus obsolete, creative versus conventional, world-savvy versus parochial. The point of the present article, however, is to show how laymen consumers, to the limits of the population sample of my study, pointedly distanced themselves from these criteria and put limitations on the "civilizing" and "educational" mission of culturedness by insisting on a very specific value economy of pleasure. I argue that what cultural revolutionaries wittingly or unwittingly provoked was not an uneducated aesthetic choice fostered in the monotony of Soviet representations but a deeply rooted Epicurean ethos which I will refer to, based on Susan Buck-Morss's description of Soviet imaginaries of sensuality, as a "sensory utopia" (2000:119).<sup>4</sup> In sensory utopia, "art" is located on the plane of pleasure and pain,

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<sup>4</sup> A caveat: I put myself in the line of fire for using "ethos" and "sensibility" which may be suspected of being expressions of some essentializing paradigms of "Russian national culture." "Ethos" here is shorthand for a view of cultural dynamics as a collection of historically situated and inflected ways to resolve some questions, some universally human incommensurabilities, such as, for instance, the divergence between language and experience or body and mind. However, not all incommensurabilities are equally salient in various places, among different social groups, and in all historical times. There are also foregrounded and backgrounded ways to formulate and to answer the challenges of such incommensurabilities. This view is perhaps also overly driven towards the structuralist side, but the question of culture has not been yet resolved in anthropology to everyone's satisfaction, and choices must be made.

whereas expert, cerebral, and intellectualist approaches are rejected in favor of the symbolic unmediatedness of art perception. Sensory utopia asserts not only the givenness but the goodness and the necessity of bodily and emotional embeddedness in one's physical reality, and the obligation to strive for and to defend the right to pleasures—a right that, I argue, is increasingly seen as shared, and shared publicly. This philosophy pays homage to the aesthetics of Soviet culturedness in that, for instance, it values classicist ideals of harmonious beauty and considers certain manifestations of craftsmanship and skill, and therefore expertise, in *producing* an art object to be indispensable to the delivery of pleasure. But it refuses to acknowledge that skill is needed to *consume* art—that one has to be “cultured” to enjoy it; and it rejects the opinion that art can, or should be, educational—especially by provoking displeasure and anxiety. It disapproves of the distance that (excessively) intellectualist/conceptual approaches to art put between the art object and its consumer and, especially, of dystopic modes of engagement with the world. My main purpose is therefore the familiar “how” of ethnographic description and interpretation: how this philosophy and emotions of (dis)pleasure play out in everyday speech and experience of public space; the particular notions of happiness and embodiment that are likely to appear in this context; and how the creators of Perm’ street art managed, or failed, to co-opt these sensibilities. On a more speculative level, I suggest how these observations may be signs of certain processes in Russian urban social formation.

### SENSORY UTOPIA AGAINST POWER

The most visible part of the project was a number of “novel” art objects installed in public places. One was the word *POWER* (*vlast'*) cast in concrete on the ground in front of the marble-clad Perm’ Krai regional parliament building.



Figure 1. *POWER*, by Mikhail Ridnyi.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> All photos are by the author.

*POWER* was designed to question the boundaries, to bring "the people closer to power" through the act of "sitting on it," as the author of the piece, sculptor Mikhail Ridnyi, explained to *Komsomol'skaia pravda* (Entsov 2010): "The location of the monument is not a coincidence, as you might have noticed. It is intended to bring down the barriers between the power and people (*narod*). It is a metaphor. In reality, people are distanced from the power. And here, people can sit on it." One could ask why, in an allegedly democratic state, people are expected to get "closer to power" through mechanisms of subversion rather than representation. But I would rather point out how the monument disregarded the complexity of the politics of public representation in general and in Russia in particular. "Revolutionaries" insisted that the city authorities did not censor but only commissioned the project—an irrelevant, or hard to believe, statement in the eyes of the postsocialist populations that continue to see the state as responsible for everything going on in public spaces (Fehervary 2009). Therefore *POWER*, produced by power, occupied the very position of subversion from which power could be critiqued. Furthermore, the history of political representation in Russia has always transcended a simple logic of obedience and transgression, following instead nuanced practices of belief and disbelief, masking and unmasking of control (Nafus 2006; Yurchak 2006). Alexei Yurchak (2006) explained that, contrary to the image of being duped by the propaganda juggernaut, Russian/Soviet people understood that what was said officially was not necessarily "untrue" but simply followed the rules of political correctness. Therefore, the distance between public art/messages and ordinary life was deemed acceptable if the message was, for instance, that of solidarity—something to be maintained at all costs (Humphrey 2001).

But for all their transgressions, the creators of "the bench" of *POWER* were not unaware of the importance of *sitting well* to Permiaks. Beer and benches, *lavochka* and *pivasik*, are rendered in their diminutive, endearing linguistic forms—little bench, little beer. They often appear inseparably together, demonstrating one of the dangers of an Epicurean approach to pleasure: alcohol is perhaps the easiest route to mindless euphoria there is.

Taking a wee rest on a bench with a bottle of something appears as close to Permiaks' understanding of human rights as one can get. Though de jure the consumption of alcohol in public space is forbidden,<sup>6</sup> drinking from perfunctorily camouflaged or brazenly unmasked bottles is an act of subversion that Permiaks adamantly refuse to forfeit. A local TV news report on a confrontation with the police documented one characteristic reply on the part of the public: "*A gde nam eshche otдохnut'?*"—"Where else are we supposed to take a wee rest?" Svetlana (accountant, 36) disputed the report of this confrontation as staged because her own rich experience of consuming beverages in the parks and backyards of Perm' proved that policemen recognized the right to benches (or at least a *brevnyshko*, a wooden log, or a *kachel'ka*—a piece of a children's playground) and bottles as the right of mature

<sup>6</sup> The 2005 federal law specified that only beverages with alcohol content of above 12 percent are forbidden for public consumption, but the control and enforcement of such divisions was understandably difficult. Beer especially was in the "gray zone."

working people “to rest.” “I have seen myself how they [policemen] passed—and even nodded!—toward groups of sensible people like myself, and only bothered those noisy teens. Because they *know!*”



Figure 2. Kama River embankment. The inscription on the log bench reads poetically: “The log, it’s mine!”

So how did ordinary Permiaks—the nameless Internet commentators, and those who walked with me the long kilometers of Permian space react to the attempt, on the part of *POWER*/power, to offer them a “bench”? They mockingly complained that power (again!) offered a subpar product in terms of *comfort*, as sitting on raspy, cold, dirty blocks of concrete is not what their backsides would like to feel. One noticed gleefully that in the absence of rubbish bins by this “bench,” it can be easily foreseen which letters are suitably shaped to become filled with garbage—quite appropriately for a representation of power, he added. Another suggested that *POWER* should be covered in wood (which is perceived as a warm, soft, and sensual material in Russia) in order for it to qualify as a bench, which would make it look even more ridiculous (but this was later done, at the expense of the “modern” aesthetics of *POWER*). Another noticed that the barren expanse of Perm’ central square, right under the windows of bureaucrats (*chinovniki*), is not where he would sit down to enjoy a beer. And some grumpily remarked that it was ridiculous to put a monument on the ground that was covered in uneven, broken, and discolored tiles. In other words, Permiaks have ignored the question of the “sophistication” of the monument, or its supposedly subversive tongue-in-cheekness, and offered instead an interpretation within the tenets of sensory utopia—a moral economy of pleasures. Below, I will further concretize Permiaks’ aesthetic economies by describing their present-day encounters with art and show how their customary modes of engagement with city space—“taking rest” and “strolling”—work within and through these economies.

## ROADSIDE PICNICS: INTRODUCTION TO *PROSTOTA*, STROLLING, RESTING, AND GREENERY

In ethnographic writing on contemporary Russia, the theme of pleasure, especially in connection to experience, has appeared scarcely (but see Caldwell 2010), dominated as it has been by other concerns. Pleasure<sup>7</sup>—and leisure—has rarely been seen as a part of performing morality, especially in the times after perestroika, saturated with anxiety and suffering, as famously shown by Ries (1996) and others. (In a sensory utopia, suffering plays a role—not that of a fetish but of an Epicurean concern with the evils of pain, strain, and anxiety.) But one particularly useful description of pleasures appeared in a study on self-identified “progressive” and “normal” young Russian urbanites conducted by Hilary Pilkington et al. (2002) in the 1990s. The young progressives saw cultural savvy, and especially knowledge of global cultural products, as their core competence and identity. The (obviously more numerous) normals, on the contrary, were attached to the very embodied, conceptually simple, and emphatically anti-intellectualist pleasures of *poguliat’* and *otdokhnut’*—taking strolls through the city and “resting.” Both groups grew up to be adults and taxpaying citizens, and it appears that their mainly aesthetic—lifestyle—divisions became a nexus of political and ethical conflict in Perm’.

Resting and strolling, popular with normals, had no instrumental rationality: when asked about these activities, “doing nothing” and “hanging out” was often the initial response, followed up by the acknowledgement of their role in establishing and maintaining social and community spirit. (Taking rest, however, did include the intrinsically asocial pleasure of a good long sleep.) The main characteristic of resting is letting go of any strain of intentionality, physical or mental, in reorientation from goals to processes.<sup>8</sup> The euphoria of this body-mind state (and its connection to sociality) is often described as “we are sitting well,” *khorocho sidim*, an expression widely popularized by the film *Particularities of National Hunting* (director Aleksandr Rogozhkin, 1996). Anything that is not eating or idle banter is decidedly counterproductive to resting. Strolling is also devoid of manifest purpose: groups of teenagers grow larger as they absorb others whom they meet on the way, relishing the spontaneity of the meetings and the event as a whole. Grown-ups suggest strolling at the first opportunity, though for them such opportunity is much less

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<sup>7</sup> My focus on pleasure and the sensorial realm may be viewed as risking “the Levy-Bruhlian view of the primitive that has been rejected at the level of mind and is renewed at the level of the body” (Lambek 2000:311). As an academically objectivized phenomenon or historically situated ideological project, sensory utopia may be indeed seen in dialectical/adversarial relations to conceptuality, to mind. But in its lived reality it embodies the irrelevance of the mind-body dichotomy altogether—an irrelevance which is, to some extent, made possible by the particular contradictions of the Soviet modernity project. Today, sensory utopia is a transgression against transgression; in other words, it rises as a stand-alone system of moral justifications in its own right.

<sup>8</sup> *Otdokhnut’*, though literally a period of recuperation, is not the natural opposite of labor. Labor, especially physical labor, is often understood as pleasure (see Caldwell 2010; also Buck-Morss 2000:105 on bodily exertion as exultation; Bykov 1996 on labor as a remedy against reflexivity and anxiety; Lovell 2005 on the history of leisure/labor).

frequent than for the carefree teenagers; and though acquaintances are often bumped into in the streets, it is rare to find them in the same relaxed mode. From the perspective of “normal” city dwellers (to the extent of my sample population), the lack of an environment conducive to strolling and resting was the main problem with public space in Perm’:

**Ekaterina:** I love forests. More greenery!

**Maksim:** More flowerbeds! Let them hang flowerpots on the posts!

**E:** Let them cover [little, cute] boardwalks with [little, cute] tiles! And put rubbish bins! And benches, and that would be all what I want. No need for any sculptures.

**M:** Especially sculptures that do not have any meaning [*niochemnyi*, lit. “about nothing”]!

**E:** Here, see, they tidied up [*oblagorodili*, lit. “ennobled”] the Sverdlov Park. I really like it. Indeed! The only money that was spent well is what they did in the park. So many people live in that district, and for once, they have a place to stroll. On foot, and with children, and with baby carriages, and with their doggies! (Ekaterina, manager in food industry, 30, married to Maksim, entrepreneur, 37)



Figure 3. Municipality billboard reports on the completion of Sverdlov Park. The park was the first example many interlocutors gave when asked what they would like their city to look like.

Elena Trubina, in her study of public space imaginaries among students (2008), described this fixation on parks, water, and greenery in their visions. To me, the overwhelming imposition of parks and flowerbeds is a reminder of the importance of tracing separately the genealogies and transformations of the medium and the message. The exuberance of organic life was prominent among the utopian languages of Soviet modernism, as described by Buck-Morss: “In the daily-life contexts of extreme cold, dark days, epidemics of disease, and wartime suffering of the Soviet



Union, all of the attributes of organic 'life' (*zhizn'*)—light, movement, sun, air, water—had utopian appeal" (2000:119–120). But "the sun-drenched canvases typical of social realists' paintings were effective not because of what they portrayed but how. Their visual style of representing bodily comfort—life over death, health over illness, plenty over want—appealed to the people on the somatic level which had little to do with their ideologically contrived content" (119). While the collapse of Soviet ideology may or may not have been complete, the aesthetic of water, greenery, and light has not lost its appeal—because this appeal never depended on the strength of ideology. The medium not only outlived the message but flourished in its absence, strengthened by the postsocialist stresses of job-juggling, impoverishment, and other deprivations.

But these "organic life" ideals need not be derived solely from the language of Soviet representations. Awe at greenery and sunlight are in sync with some worldwide synchronicities. Permiaks' fixation on parks and greenery may be parochial in the eyes of the Project managers, but I found that it speaks, with emphasis and awareness, in at least one language of globalization—the language of ecology and environmentalism. Perm' is a polluted city; it was called by Soviet-era poets "a working city" on a "laboring river," and the long-standing problems of local oil refineries and other polluting enterprises have lately been compounded by unregulated development and a manifold increase in the number of private automobiles. ("Please help yourself to the water," I was told by one of my hosts—"in this jar, the water is purchased and then boiled, so it is drinkable; and in this one—tap water that we boiled for technical use.") The following is a verbatim account of how the delight with eye-candy flower baskets can transform, in one breath, into a concern for ecological problems (and the taken-for-granted responsibility of the state for their solution):

Take, for instance, Chaikovskii.<sup>9</sup> How beautiful it is! I was shocked [*ja byl v shoke*]! I was stunned by that beauty [*obaldet', krasota kakaiia*]! Lanterns along the road, they have flowerpots on them! They have cleaner air, and this means they have better food. The federal government mandated some geodesists to drill the city's own well, so they have better water. And everything is in top-notch condition. Benches are painted, grass is green, shop windows are beautiful. I was shocked! And here [*points outwards*], everything is just gray. Where is the inspiration? (Pavel, engineer, 36)

The "creative" art novelties installed in the city's streets apparently did not inspire Pavel. His sentiment was mirrored in the process of relocation of the city's rich who take their inspirations—and their money—out of the city center and into the suburban gated communities where they can enjoy greenery, water, and cleaner air.

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<sup>9</sup> Another city in Perm' Krai.



Figure 4. *The Angel of Kama River*, by Dmitrii Postnikov. The sensual biomorphism of the sculpture is annulled by the usage of scrap iron, making it a mockery of Permiaks' ecological concerns: the river Kama is known to be polluted with industrial refuse to the point that apocryphal stories are told about Japanese businesses offering to clean the riverbed for the price of taking the trash they remove.

Conceptual and material simplicity, *prostota* (adj. *prostoi*) of strolling and resting, of clean food, water, and air, and the symbolic load of material environments ("no need for any sculptures," as Maksim noted above), is a question of not only aesthetic but ethical validity. In Pesmen's comprehensive *Russia and Soul*, *prostota* is described as the morality of living a simple life, being unpretentious as opposed to being "cultured" and paying (too much) homage to "matters of manners, intelligence, education, erudition, and worldliness" (2000:91; see also examples of the moral codes of *prostota* in drinking rituals in Koester 2003). Pesmen points out that the imperative of *prostota* does not distinguish between mind and body: intelligence, manners, and material technologies are all guarded against excessive sophistication. The philosophy of "enjoying but not too much," or being cultured but, again, not too much, can be connected to (but not explained away by) the contradictions in the politics of the Soviet state in the sphere of morality and consumption. The Soviet top-down "dictatorship of needs" (Fehér, Heller, and Márkus 1983) strove to reconcile the frugality of Soviet modern aesthetics and moral ideals, and the realities of the economy of shortages, with the need to compete with sophisticated Western consumerism and growing internal consumerist demands (Fehervary 2009; Gronow 2003; Humphrey 1995; Kelly and Volkov 1998; Kelly 2001). In the postsocialist 1990s, the "moralizing tenets suspicious of goods and yet convinced of their potency" (Fehervary 2009:455) were compounded in a curious way when exposed to real,

rather than imagined, Western consumerism. Quite contrary to the predictions of a consumerist boom among populations previously deprived of consumer choice, the influx of Western goods produced what Caroline Humphrey (1995) called "a culture of disillusionment" in the glamour of sophistication, and variety wherein too good was also no good. *Prostota* became the opposite of variety that is often unjustifiably, and unjustly, expensive, while at the same time "you search and search and all of them [sausages] look suspicious" (Klumbyte 2010:31). *Prostoi*, therefore, does not mean unimpressive or shoddy but rather pleasantly uncomplicated; and while technological sophistication is not bad per se, it is suspicious because too often connected to disillusionment.

### **"IT SMELLS OF NOTHING BUT INKI" PERM' ARBAT AND SENSORY ENGAGEMENTS**

A stretch of Kirov Street was turned into a pedestrian promenade and a small arts market in an attempt to emulate the famous Arbat Street in Moscow. I, Irina (pediatrician, 37), and her husband Dmitrii (mechanic, late 40s) went for a stroll to investigate. Irina and Dmitrii were disappointed: the street offered little in terms of sensual discovery, and the only local café with a patio—Irina was determined to have a juicy kebab in the open air—turned out to be closed. The merchants in shabby wooden shacks (meant to look rustic?) traded in folksy knickknacks of the kind that could be found in any shopping mall in Perm'. I recalled how an anonymous Internet commentator related that "if indeed they wanted to make a merchants' street, if Arbat ever was one, it should have a bakery and other shops, and *smell accordingly*. Perm' Arbat smells of nothing but ink!" The latter remark referred to the fact that the buildings in the centrally located Kirov Street were mainly occupied and guarded by bureaucrats (and, by extension, *smelled* of ink—of the boredom and anxiety typical of ordinary bureaucratic interactions with the state). So it was the rather unassuming looking but fragrant bush that caught Irina's most profound admiration—"Is it jasmine? I think it is! Oh, my!"<sup>10</sup> Finally, I was told, "Come on, have a look at what we found!" The discovery was of the façade of a house, hidden from view from the street, covered in ivy leaves and flowers overflowing from window baskets. We stood and admired it for a while.

The longing to smell pastries, kebabs, and jasmine is illustrative of a common disposition: performing strolls through the city, especially when in a light-hearted and mischievous mood, my respondents strived to physically consume the city space. Ol'ga Boitsova (2008) points out that such interactive keenness is characteristic of people who aim to appropriate spaces they do not usually belong in, such as tourists. It prompts the interpretation that Permiaks do not feel at home in their own city; considering that they have little say in the development of the city commons, this is not surprising. Mischief with statues has also been made possible only recently: Soviet art distanced itself from viewers not only through prohibitions but also high

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<sup>10</sup> One should keep in mind that this sort of affection for greenery is also a way of performing femininity in Russia.

pedestals (Boitsova 2008). In unfamiliar places the keenness for interaction is exacerbated, leading to a displeasure with the behavior of Russian tourists at international resorts—those places of ultimate sensory utopia. If it is any consolation, local resorts are appropriated as physically as international ones. Tat'iana (saleswoman, 37) showed me photos of her vacation in a town where there were many sculptures of fish, mermaids, and such. She mounted all that could be mounted and laughingly scolded her partner for just mounting and not engaging more sensually with a “mermaid”: “I told him—you are sitting on a woman, you should at least grab her by the tits!” The main attractions of the city, however, were the squirrels that also participated in the utopia of pleasurable, organic abundance: “They just run around on the ground, just like that. But they are spoilt—they do not eat sunflower seeds. People go to the stores for them, to get them nuts!” She believed the squirrels were on the verge of moral transgression, turning away from the *prostoi* seeds for the more expensive and “sophisticated” nuts; but they were forgiven.



Figure 5. *Happiness is Not Beyond the Mountains* [is near; is closer than one expected] on Kama River embankment, an example of a well-liked “contemporary art” piece, by Boris Matrosov. What the object lacks in sensory engagement, is provided by the background. It became a popular site to take pictures on graduation days.



*Figure 6.* Utopia, close-up and contextualized. At the front—improvised benches and beer; at the background—city industrial port. The add-on graffiti on the right side of *Happiness* is an attempt to relate “abstract” happiness to personal hopes and pleasures: “Happiness is not beyond the mountains, my beloved!”

### **STROLLING: THE UNFIXED GAZE AND THE IMMEDIACY OF PERCEPTION**

In their analysis of an interview about the experience of walking in a holiday parade in late socialist times, Kelly and Sirotinina (2008:283) point out one curious example of a divergence between walking as bodily pleasure and walking as having a purpose or destination: “The lack of precision in the second quotation—‘a square somewhere’—is interesting. The informant’s sense of the point of the procession is equally limited: it is not the destination but the motion itself that mattered: “You would walk along with your legs stepping out like a real grown up.” (The quotation also describes childhood experiences, which will be important to the issues described in the later part of my discussion.) Indeed, one pleasure of walking is the movement itself, and the ordinary bodily practice of strolling refutes the tyranny of destination, of purposefulness. But it is also easy to recognize a subversive spirit in communal strolling: walking-along, stepping-out, and gazing-around in a group, even though it is emphatically “about nothing,” is always a parade and a demonstration of power. It is also an inspection—a dimension of strolling most easily provoked by the abundance of novelties in the streets. The art pieces, however, were not inspected separately from their environs. I was told indignantly that installations were placed next to a heap of rubbish, a dilapidated building, or streaks of soot on the unwashed concrete. I was showed with glee how the “cultured” façade of the PERMM museum “flipped,” with the immediacy of a tossed coin, into its own unsightly littered backyard—a

backyard which added insult to injury because it was a part of the most sensual, the most “restful” place in Perm—the Kama River embankment:



*Figure 7. PERMM: at the front.*



*Figure 8. PERMM: backyard.*

Spending money on art in the presence of garbage is idiocy, I was told. Apart from the harmonious balances of the sensory utopia, such a view, as I see it, is inherent to the very practice of strolling, which produces a different mode of attention

than that of the immobile projectile of a gaze rooted on a vantage point. While the artists relied on the objects' separation from their surroundings and on the assumption that a spectator's gaze would absorb each piece as a self-sufficient singularity, the embodiment of strolling resisted this separation. If, however, the incongruity between the object and its surroundings was yet another "artistic stick," sensory utopian aesthetics resented the incongruous as unpleasant. Contrasts have a place in the sensory utopia but this place is carefully designated: for instance, a pleasant discovery creates a contrast between the foreseeable and unforeseeable. Strolling fosters, and reflects, this sense of wonder that looks forward to being pleasantly surprised.

Such surprises are also quite bodily. In the sensory utopian ethos, aesthetic violence and aesthetic pleasure are not matters of taste or cultural reference—they are overwhelming bodily realities which forestall reflexivity or distancing. Encounters with sensual beauty were described as giving "shock," or "stunning" (see Pavel's speech above<sup>11</sup>). Similarly, encounters with "novel" art in the streets were also described in terms of being (suddenly) overwhelmed. Svetlana: "This art, it *gave me shivers*. I have a right, you know, not to be *shocked* when I *turn around the corner* and see these scary figures! Let there be scary things, but in specially designated places (*spetsial'no otvedennykh mestakh*)." And again, Permiaks' value valences are quite different from some famous critiques of modernity. Michael Taussig (1992:197), elaborating on Benjamin's "distraction" as a mode of attention, described "the type of flipping and barely conscious peripheral vision perception unleashed with great vigor by modern life at the crossroads of the city, the capitalist market, and modern technology," where a "certain tactility grown out of distracted vision" is "hitting spectator like a bullet." Taussig implicitly connected tactility and the unintentionality of perception to aggression ("unleashed" and "bullet"). Tactility, suddenness, or variously "distracted" or "peripheral" modes of attention performed during strolling are not implicitly connected to aggression—they can be pleasurable as well. Moreover, if an unpleasant sculpture shocks the viewer against her will, a truly pleasurable one similarly should not require effort but simply grasp the inattentive viewer.

In regards to this, the immediacy of perception in strolling is echoed in praise of the immediacy of perception attributed to children. Children were said to be the true judges of what was, and was not, worthy about art (in the vein of an "out of the mouths of babes" argument). Whether intended for minors or not, the implication was that if children cannot enjoy a piece of art, it is not a good piece of art (that is, not art at all). Marina (factory technician, 37) told me how her seven-year-old son was promised dinosaurs in the PERMM Museum but the family miscalculated the exhibition dates among many of Perm's cultural events, the majority of which Marina did not care for much but the dinosaurs were not to be missed. What they found, however, was another exhibition (she remembered neither the name nor the objects—"something sculptured. What do they call them... *installiatsii* (installations). I don't

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<sup>11</sup> See also Oushakine (2008) on the trope of "suddenness" in late socialist imaginaries and some thought-provoking parallels in Friedman (2007) on the meanings of "shock" in the contemporary process of globalization in Romania.

understand"). Marina's son, she said, had run impatiently around the vast halls of the former Perm' boat station housing PERMM before he cried out: "*Nu che tut smotret-to?*" (So, what is it here to look at?). In one exclamation he conveyed that he had laid out his attention to be caught in a pleasurable sensory trap; when this did not happen, he grudgingly realized that he had to exert some contemplative effort and enquired which object he was supposed to do it with. This grudge (and the irony, apparent in Marina's story) was not lost on his parents, who took him instead to a nearby oldie but goodie, the Perm' State Art Gallery, which boasts a prized collection of delightfully pagan Christian wooden sculptures. Both Marina's son and her husband were thrilled, not for the first time, to see the Mongolian-eyed, life-size figurines of brightly painted Jesuses, although Marina herself did not go because she always found them "too scary." There is, indeed, a place for pleasurable scary things, a "*pecially designated place,*" in my other respondent's words quoted above, of an indoor museum.<sup>12</sup>

And yet, initially unpopular art projects may eventually succeed because the sensory utopian ethos of engagement offers itself to assimilation as well as to resentment. Sometimes, when the initial shock subsided, people accepted these novelties more readily—especially if some inherent features of the installation were sensory-utopic. The *POWER* bench, as I have heard, is still favored more by "noisy teens" at night than by "sensible people" during the day. But the cheerfully red *Red People*, despite their asensual formalism, had better luck. A reviewer of an earlier version of this paper quoted some Permiaks who were initially very critical of the *People* but turned around in their opinion: "Now I say hello to the red men on rainy mornings when I go to work—they're so bright and always there, waiving good morning!" Similarly, Lilia (manager in the automobile industry, 34) detested a very tall wooden letter П (for Пермь<sup>13</sup>) for being "a rather messy pile of wood" and noted sarcastically that it won't be long before someone attempts to burn it down. This was when we looked at the thing from afar. But when we went closer to investigate, she stroked the raw wooden logs and noticed that they smelled really nice and even had some drops of liquid sap still on the surface.

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<sup>12</sup> Considering the unique ways of "art" as a "civilizing process" and relation of power, it is relevant to note that the "out of mouth of babes" argument did not transfer from art to the practice of reading. In another conversation, Marina told me that she made it her mission to force her son to read—facing considerable resistance on his part.

<sup>13</sup> *Perm' City Gates* by Nikolai Polisskii.





Figure 9. One of the *Red People*, by Pprofessors Art Group.

### THE PROBLEM WITH MEANING: RIGHTFUL, WRONGFUL, AND LABORIOUS

The processual focus of strolling and resting on the body and sociality stands in contrast to the anxiety about the conceptual load of artistic objects. The economy of sensory utopia stipulates that the amount of mental strain counts towards the cost of obtaining the pleasure and should never exceed the amount of pleasure received. Indeed, creating meaning, even if it is merely interpretation, is a type of labor the strain of which is often obscured by discourses of creativity and joy in meaning making (Crapanzano 2004:10). In the quote above, both Ekaterina and Maksim did not emphasize the culturedness of the exemplary Sverdlov Park—though Ekaterina did use the word “ennobled” (*oblagorodili*). The sculptures, the material objects that represented both the “meaningful” and the “cultured,” were specifically dismissed; then Maksim commented that some sculptures would be acceptable if they abided by the sensory utopia economy of meaning (in particular, as my guess would be, narrationality, or being “about something”). Pleasurable art is therefore narrative, as opposed to symbolic or conceptual; realistic, as opposed to abstract; sensual; and optimistic.

The “ennobled” Sverdlov Park resembled an idealized version of the “English gardens” that made Agatha Christie’s detective TV series a major attraction for Marina. Marina said she did not care much about the brainier aspect of the series, the whodunit plots. She enjoyed “all these beautiful gardens, how people talk, how they walk in these beautiful environments—not like ours, where it is too much fat on a slice of cheap sausage!” What fascinated me was the spontaneous (I did not ask any

questions about it) counterpositioning of the intellectual side of the series—its detective plot—and the aesthetic pleasurability of quaint English villages and British etiquette. The detective plot was constructed as the opposite of, or irrelevant to, the mindless enjoyment of the series' visuals, the eye-candy part, while simultaneously the culturedness—the “tastefulness” (“no cheap fat!”)—of English garden was mobilized on the side of the “pleasure” and not the “mind.” Marina was not alone: I was told by many others, sometimes apologetically, sometimes defiantly, that their TV preferences lay with comedies and, tellingly, the eye-candy Discovery Channel—and their pleasure is precisely that they held little meaning apart from being “just for laughs” (*chisto porzhat'*) and “resting” (*otdokhnut'*).

Maintaining “mental hygiene” against excessive desires (Humphrey 1995), *unynie* (acedia), or other sorts of *negativ* thinking, was a constant concern among my interlocutors. Excessive reflexivity was commonly denounced as detrimental to optimistic dispositions and therefore to the very vitality which was in itself treasured as a scarce resource. Dystopic and irony-laden contemporary art could not have, therefore, been met simply with indifference: it was seen as an aggressive appropriation of this resource. Inna, a thirty-year-old curator of the local theater, brought this sentiment to light by describing the taste for dystopias as a privilege—and simultaneously a reflection of guilty conscience for that privilege—on the part of those who have these (and other) resources in abundance. Art of this kind, she said, is not popular and cannot be popular in Perm' for a while:

These things they are showing to us in the theaters, in the museums. . . . Cheap, lowly things that expose the deficiencies and fatalities of the world. They think they are messiahs; they show how this world is ugly, shitty, hopeless. Somewhere in Germany it is justified because they have another social situation. Those *burzhua* [bourgeois] need a reminder of universal suffering. And here, the aesthetics of corpses is met with deep resentment because there is no class in Perm' who would reflect on it in the same way. The young want joyful things, and if there is a “middle” class of 25–35-year-old people, they have neither time nor disposition for German bourgeois reflexivity! They already suffer! They have to *delo delat'* [do business] and watch out so that they are not jailed!<sup>14</sup> They spend nights at work, and they do not have a guilty social conscience!

One city legend, a story of a “monument that never was,” celebrated the full suspension of the top-down imposition of meanings that allowed an object's ready appropriation. The municipality had placed a rough piece of stone to mark the construction of a monument to something or someone which my respondents did not care to remember. Meanwhile, newlyweds would *povadilis'*—a verb expressing a repeated appropriation of something pleasurable but forbidden, like a cat stealing cream from a dairymaid's bucket, or a lover visiting an unwed girl—breaking bottles of fizzy spirits against the stone in celebrations of their unions. Apparently the stone

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<sup>14</sup> *Delo delat'* is to create and distribute real value as opposed to merely siphon wealth through scheming and thieving (see Rogers 2006). As to why they can quite ordinarily end up in prison when they have no criminal intent, see Ella Paneiak's (2008) ethnography of business in Russia.

was "about nothing"—it did not have an explicit meaning already attached, but in terms of Peircian semiotics, it was indexical. People appropriated this vacant indexicality. The stone marking the place for some future monument became a very present monument that marked and facilitated a ritual. The city bureaucrats chose to remove the stone because it had become an "uncultured," littered space.

But the question of pleasurable meaning, in its sensory utopia sense, is suspended in the case of representations which I herewith call *politically correct*. Meant to express the strength of the symbolic order and social solidarity, their public placement is justified not as pleasure but as reassurance against the evil of fear and anxiety. Still, the question of their congruity with the surroundings remains important: they had better be placed where their political rhetoric does not clash with the sensory-utopian character of the place. The sensual river embankment was deemed a bad place for the otherwise "legit" statues of Pushkin and Gogol, monuments to national pride in Russian literature.<sup>15</sup> Tat'iana mocked the insensitivity of the city government that placed Gogol and Pushkin on the riverbank—"Chto k chemu?" "What comes to what; how is it becoming?" was her appraisal of that (il)logic. An example of correct placement was the figure of St. Nicholas erected in front of the Perm' Orthodox cathedral. *The New York Times* (Olaf-Jones 2011) calls the statue "tubular" (and misidentifies it as St. Stephen); indeed, though very iconic, St. Nicholas is neither very sensual nor particularly realistic. Nevertheless, I have not heard anyone disapprove of the statue.<sup>16</sup> The rightful emplacement of St. Nicholas appeared to be appreciated in narratives about a traffic incident that happened in 2010. Broken brakes on a bus led to a wild ride down and then up the hill on the busiest city street, catching and hauling along dozens of vehicles. The bus stopped at St. Nicholas's pedestal: the long run of a "rabid beast" was "tamed at St. Nicholas's feet."

## THE ASSAULT ON THE FOUNTAIN

Oleg Kharkhordin (2012) dwells on the connection between the tactility and physicality of *res publica*, the public things, "the commonly regulated roads and rivers, city things, symbols and statues," and their potential for producing *sentire de re publica*—the public sense (or sentience). Sensory utopia, its emphasis on materialism and aestheticism should prompt particular sensitivity of political sentiment to the changes in the material environment. Aesthetics is central for Epicurean ethics—beauty is thus transformed into value, a measure of things, an ethical question. It is also a question of transgression: something that is purposefully unpleasing to the eye is sacrilegious. The assault on public things, especially when proclaimed in the name of art/beauty/aesthetics, lifts Epicurean values from the mute realm of the body to a more accessible narration, where it exceedingly outgrows the realm of the intimate and the personal. It is therefore unsurprising that the demolition of the city

<sup>15</sup> The embankment was not in Perm' but in another city.

<sup>16</sup> I am grateful to the reviewer who pointed out that the St. Nicholas statue was not part of the "revolution" but a gift from the private oil giant Lukoil to the city of Perm'. Though dominant in the local market, Lukoil is interested in fostering consumer loyalty, not provoking displeasure.

fountain has wrought a particularly vehement scandal. I was told that the “cultural invaders” wanted to realize a new design for the fountain: a composition consisting of three kneeling GULAG inmates taking a piss. The power of this threat (true or not), of this dystopic vision can only be understood against what the utopia of fountains really means to Permiaks. Fountains are the perfect sensory objects, and if the weather is minimally warm for strolling or “sitting well,” the squares around fountains fill up quickly with people and the palpable sentiment of shared mindless enjoyment. The project that was finally made public suggested that instead of a fountain, the “excessive” expansion of the square was to be divided with a twelve-meter-tall wooden wall that would serve as both an architectural detail and a space for art exhibitions. But it seems that Permiaks’ appreciation for all things wooden would not be enough to make them see a sun-blocking fence as an object of art. In the curious reversal of the gross GULAG fountain imagery, and in line with the above-described warnings that the wooden letter П is likely to be a target of arson<sup>17</sup> and the *POWER* “bench” to be littered, Maksim told me with some satisfaction that the city planners will get what they deserve: local alcoholics will find it their duty to piss on the wall. Envisioning destruction of the unpleasant objects seemed to be readily accessible to Permiaks, just like the idea of physical appropriation of the pleasant ones. The old fountain was demolished in 2011; since then, decisions on the transformation of city space have been more cautious (see Conclusions). The wall idea has not been abandoned, but a new, and quite conventional, fountain will be built to replace the old one.

### WHOSE CREATIVITY? CHILDHOOD UTOPIA MEETS THE FATHER FIGURE OF POWER

For Inna, a theater curator who grew up in a family of musicians, discussions about beauty led very naturally to ballet. Good ballet, she said, is an example of how something associated with “culturedness” and class, or with “Sovietness” and therefore older generations, is alive and well because good ballet can be eye candy, utopian, something pleurably scary or pleurably beautiful:

When people come to the theater, they say—give us *skazka* [fairytale]! Why do you think ballets are so popular? They say in these very words—we want *skazka*! Why do I need all this [dystopic or depressing things], I have enough of it already [in everyday life]. I want the beauty, the fairytale, these ... English gardens you told me about! They want Pierrot!<sup>18</sup> They want Hollywood! (**AK:** I don’t think English gardens are very close aesthetically to Hollywood...) Well, here, you see—ballet is good both for those who want Hollywood and those who like English gardens. And the young people find it interesting too.

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<sup>17</sup> There was an arson attack on П in 2011. Contemporary art was saved by contemporary anti-inflammatory agents steeped into the wood.

<sup>18</sup> A character from Alexey Tolstoy’s rendition of Carlo Collodi’s *The Adventures of Pinocchio*.

This statement reiterates once more that the opposition between culturedness and sensory utopia is by no means cast in stone. The "tasteful" and "cultured" ballet, like the "tasteful" but "mindless" English gardens, can be a pleasantly gripping experience. But I want to draw particular attention to the word *skazka*—the children's fairytale. It reminded me of the discussion on post-Soviet city space offered by Bruce Grant (2001). He identified the "cartoonish," "grotesque," and "archaic" aesthetics of monuments in Moscow in the 1990s as the aesthetics of childhood and innocent beginnings and argued that such a "youthful gambit" belied the political intention of the Kremlin to "infantilize" post-Soviet urban space and to revert the historic sense of Muscovites to the prehistoric, and therefore politically innocent, chronotope where no responsibility for the past could be attributed to the powerful. I have already mentioned that children and the "childish" mode of art perception—unmediated, effortless awe—is the ideal to which consumerist art (but not "politically correct" representation) should aspire. So the question is, which of the "cartoonish" representations in Moscow were perceived by the general public—and not only by cultural critics and other experts—as intended for pleasurable consumption, and which as representing power, or society? Equally uneasy is the question of whether all the monuments described by Grant could indeed be connected to childhood—and hence "infantilism"—within the local tenets of meaning. My own view on fairytales, childhood, and their role in Russian sensibilities benefits from extensive explorations of the subject carried out recently, especially in the works by Catriona Kelly. Childhood—a time of contentment and security—was the Russian/Soviet model of happiness (Kelly 2009). The (magical) realism, narrationality, and optimism of childish *skazka* are not only, nor even primarily, about innocence but about pleasure. Art objects can therefore be, to use Grant's vocabulary, fantastical or grotesque but still not associated with childhood/innocence—if they are, for instance, dystopic. The sense of "childishness" as being removed from (political) reality is also not entirely warranted. The *skazka* of childhood is indeed escapist in the sense of distancing oneself from life's sorrows and anxieties, but it moves one closer to an exploration of life's pleasures—an exploration which may be politically charged, both inherently and overtly (children's games in Soviet Union were both pleasurable *and* often imitated adults' political and military organization; see Dimke 2012). I suspect that the little river embellished with realistic bronze animals in the area of the Kremlin—*Russian Fairy Tales*, an art composition that Grant calls "a petting zoo"—is quite popular and its pleurability in the eyes of the Epicurean public outweighs the question of whether bears are guilty of being innocent and thus facilitate a political technology. And it remains a question whether people see the "petting zoo" as *representing* the power because the animals are placed in the most iconic place of power, or if they perceive them as a *gesture of submission* on the part of the powerful who give over some of their politically correct but rather pompous space to pleasurable consumerist art. The statues of Pushkin and Gogol (in the example above) lost their powers of "political correctness" when they were placed on the sensual river embankment; but when the river embankment was brought to the Kremlin, it might have preserved its sensual appeal because this appeal, as Buck-Morss (2000) rightfully noticed, is above the contrivances of ideology. I hasten to point out that Grant's main argument—the intention on the part of the Kremlin to use the pleasurable *skazka* to distract from

questions of historical consciousness and historic responsibility—not only stands the test of time but is perhaps more effective than he argued.

Childhood as happiness is one of the rare *positive* discourses and sentiments that survived, practically unharmed, the dissolution of the Soviet symbolic order. If anything, its rather solitary survival ensured that it entered the spheres and the frames to which it did not belong before: compare Oleinik's (2010) observation that sexual banter, another positive survival, became a ubiquitously acceptable framework of interaction in the land where Soviet and post-Soviet pegs and holes of meaning no longer fit together (for a vision of post-Soviet symbolic disorders, see Oushakine 2001:301). The very proliferation of the childhood ethos may be seen as allowing the cultural revolutionaries to appeal to "creativity" and free expression. However, because the positive connotation of childhood in the recent history of Russia has not been about creativity or freedom of expression but about "happiness or contentment born of security, familiarity, a sense of certainty and a sense of purpose" (Kelly 2009:17), this ideational maneuver, in the eyes of Permiaks, is deceptive. Childishness (happiness) for some comes at the cost of maturity—responsibility, stress, displeasure, and mental strain—for others. The freedom to be at ease belongs to the consumer who, as it was argued above, should not have to make an effort to appreciate art. By the very same limitation, the producers of art cannot be unconditionally, freely, or naively creative. When some of my interlocutors did use the trope of childhood as negative in their assessment of the art, they did not mean archaic themes or fantastical elements but the qualities of being unimpressive, cheaply made, or lacking signs of careful craftsmanship. The *Red People* were scorned by Maksim because "[t]hese sort of pursuits are only worthy of a primary school pupil!" And while consumerist art was deemed good if it inspired the public to be *like* children—that is, pleased and spoiled within their sensory utopia—the practice of representing people *as* children, or assuming that people *are* children, was not looked upon kindly. Aleksandr, a thirty-seven-year-old professional actor and entrepreneur in the sphere of entertainment, was infuriated at the choice of fonts for the posters advertising the city's biggest cultural festival "Perm', Live": "Why do they always use these doodling fonts for these posters? The fonts, they mean something—do they think that Permiaks are children who cannot write properly?" Cartoonish, "doodling" aesthetics was denounced when it officially represented the collective identity of Permiaks as a part of an ongoing political campaign. Aleksandr did not mind, however, the cartoonish *Salty Ears* bronze piece in the city center that anecdotally—unofficially—represented Permiaks ("salty ears" is the historical nickname for the dwellers of the Perm' region, known for salt mining; cartoonish or not, it portrayed Permiaks positively as honest laborers carrying "the salt of the earth" on their backs).

Similar resentment was reserved for art that was unimpressive but perceived as attempting, at the same time, to deliver a politically correct message. Politically correct representations are not obligated to be sensory-utopic or realistic (for example, the "tubular" St. Nicholas), but there are limits. Dmitrii, Irina's husband, was obviously and increasingly disappointed with the "discoveries" we made on our stroll, but kept mostly silent (perhaps, for fear of being seen as "uncultured" in his

disapproval). His patience broke down at the sight of the funeral-pyre-shaped wooden composition erected in front of the marble-clad Ural Hotel: “What is it, a dinosaur? *The Spine of Russia*? I thought it was an ugly wooden fence!” (I have been to Dmitrii’s dacha and can attest that, indeed, the balance of *prostota* prescribes that a fence be made of processed and stained wood.) In Russian, the name “the Spine of Russia” (*Khrebet Rossii*) has no implicit humor or irony. It is a rather lofty but mythical and poetic name for Dmitrii’s land—the Ural Mountains. Dmitrii was not amused.



Figure 10. *The Spine of Russia*, by Dmitrii Shchukin.

## CONCLUSIONS

In 2012, when I was working on this paper, Oleg Chirkunov, Perm’ Krai governor and the main sponsor of the “cultural revolution,” was removed from his position soon after Vladimir Putin was inaugurated as the new (old) Russian president. In June 2012, “Perm’, the cultural capital of Europe” project was shut down; there were rumors of police investigations into the use of public funds. Nevertheless, the program of festivals, cultural exchange programs, theater productions, and art exhibitions in Perm’ remains (so far) one of the densest in the country, to some relief for those of my friends whom I am tempted, remembering Pilkington’s et al. (2002) study, to call “the progressives.” But many of them asked very much the same questions that Bruce Grant asked about the 1990s Moscow monumentalization: what does the coming and going of “cultural revolution” in Perm’ tell us about the intentions of the powerful? The most disillusioned interpretation might be that it was a carefully arranged long-term provocation on the part of now-president Putin (who has recently proved his great ability at arranging long-term political gambits). “Revolution,” I was told, was allowed to happen under Medvedev’s presidency in order to stir public sentiment towards anxiety and displeasure—

in other words, and in the paradigms of the present discussion, to display the crime of transgression against the ethos of sensory utopia—and make people long for a savior. It may have succeeded in doing just that: many reactions against “Muscovite cultural raiders” were decidedly militant, nationalist, and fundamentalist. What I hope to have shown is that this transgression mattered in *other ways*<sup>19</sup> than the garden variety of corruption and violence understood in Russia as transgressing the moral order but not being out of the ordinary, in other words, “politics as usual.”

On a more optimistic note, the gradual triumph of the ethos of *prostoi* pleasures may lead to a special sort of moral consumerism, opening particular venues and impediments to the development of Russian society. Sensory utopia may become something more than an unarticulated, embodied symbolic center of everyday pursuits. Transporting the weight of the discourse from the mind/body to pleasure/pain dichotomies, it may become a grassroots basis for wider social identities and collectivities. Ekaterina’s emphatic enumeration of who benefits from the strolling in the park (above)—“on foot, and with children, and with baby carriages, and with their doggies”—constitutes, as I argue, a protean imagined community brought forward by a sense of sharing in the aesthetic enjoyment of sensual public space. The spirit of this public unity is far from the all-inclusive spirit of Bakhtinian carnivals and Turner’s *communitas*, or the inclusive, politically tolerant (in rhetoric if not in practice) imaginary of contemporary world metropolises. Migrants, the homeless, or even “noisy” teenagers are elided from her (and others’) vision of the sensory utopia. The public in the park is not just mediocre but emphatically mediocre: it is inimical to both the perceived elitism of the cosmopolitan intelligentsia and the embodied dissolution of the marginalized (the common image is of a homeless guy lying in an alcoholic stupor, chasing sensory utopia to the point of senseless anesthesia). But, as Trubina (2008) concluded, the preference for an aesthetics of greenery and parks is one manifestation of civic dignity. The philosophy of *prostoi* pleasures may arise as a position of moral superiority—and a nascent class position—from which to critique both conspicuous consumption and elitist intellectualism. Mediocre or not, it may come to be that the public around the fountain will indeed acknowledge city space as their place, and in the act of emplacement will be born as, well, the public.

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<sup>19</sup> There is a well-known connection between aestheticizing politics, the sacrality of beauty, and fascism—see, for instance, Morozov (2012).



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## «УТОПИЯ ОЩУЩЕНИЙ» ВО ВРЕМЕНА КУЛЬТУРНОЙ РЕВОЛЮЦИИ: ОБ ИСКУССТВЕ, ПУБЛИЧНОМ ПРОСТРАНСТВЕ И МОРАЛЬНОЙ ОНТОЛОГИИ КЛАССА

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*В основе этой статьи – результаты исследования, осуществленного при щедрой поддержке Университета Торонто, Канадского научного совета по социальным и гуманитарным исследованиям и Фонда антропологических исследований Веннера-Грена. Я выражаю благодарность Суви Салменниemi, Майклу Лэмбеку, Елене Трубиной, Наталье Рудаковой, Юлии Лернер, Ивану Калмару, Фабио Маттиоли, Катерине Борелли и Келвину Сикстрому за комментарии, позволившие улучшить эту статью. Я также благодарна за ценные замечания двум анонимным рецензентам и редакторам Laboratorium.*

**В результате усиления социальных, психологических и морально-философских различий между классами в бывшем СССР возникло напряжение между двумя эстетико-этическими позициями. Это напряжение проявилось особенно ярко и получило новую интерпретацию в ходе недавнего конфликта по поводу публичного пространства в одном «среднестатистическом» российском городе. Интеллектуалистскому и антиутопическому способу восприятия мира здесь противостоит «утопия ощущений», которая подробно анализируется в данной статье. Комплекс практик и убеждений «утопии ощущений» предполагает не только данность, но и морально-эстетическую необходимость неопосредованной включенности в физическую и социальную реальность, а также устремленность к определенному рода «простым» удовольствиям, понимаемую и как право, и как моральная необходимость. Вместо того, чтобы интерпретировать «утопию ощущений» как консервативный дискурс «возвращения к истокам» и «опрощения», усилившийся в результате травматического опыта постсоциализма, я предлагаю рассматривать это явление в более оптимистическом ключе – как самобытный феномен, ресурс и инструмент бытия-в-культуре, способный стать почвой для становления новых гражданских и внерелигиозных идентичностей и сообществ.**

**Ключевые слова:** постсоциализм; этика; класс; удовольствие; телесность; пространство города; культурная политика