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'Rubbish' Collector Petlyura On Show

By Ingrid Nevenchannaya

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Artist and collector Petlyura was the head of a squat on Petrovsky Bulvar in the 1990s. An exhibit of his performances runs at Na Solyanke till Saturday.

In the mid-1990s, there was only one place for any self-respecting bohemian or artist in Moscow: a small squat on Petrovsky Bulvar.

Anyone who wants a peek into that world should look at the "Pozorishche" exhibit at Na Solyanke Gallery that focuses on the work of the king of that squat, Petlyura.

Petlyura is famous for collecting old Soviet clothes and items that he initially housed in the squat and for the performance art he and his followers created.

"There is such energy in them," he said in an interview of his old Soviet collection, which he said costs $15,000 a year to keep in storage. "Today is a time when things change so quickly."

Among the items that fascinate him, which he usually finds at markets, are presents made by prisoners in the 1980s.

“The prisoners would compete among one another as to who would make the best buckles, belts, etc. … Every time has its own quality decorative art,” he said. “The most interesting was when people stole wire from a factory, wrapping it around their arms. When they got home, they did everything they could with it. Rings, bracelets … I think that Soviet women are stylish. On the most ordinary dress they would wear a wonderful brooch made out of wires.”

Using his collection, which many called a selection of junk, Petlyura drew in a varied collection of people to the squat to take part in his performances.

The exhibit is made up of photos and videos of those performances.

“[It] shows two different sides of Petlyura: the ideological head of the squat and, at the same time, a vivid performer,” said Alexander Uskov, the curator of the exhibit.

“There were not so many galleries before, but there was a squat. … Petlyura was the catalyst of the creative process and at the same time an artist in his own right. That’s why they call him the collector of the rubbish tip,” Uskov said.

The squat, in prime Moscow real estate, did not last as Moscow gentrified. “How can you have a squat in modern Moscow?” Uskov said.

But the recordings of performances provide a glimpse of that time. Uskov compared Petlyura to Andy Warhol as the founder of performance art in Russia.

“If a person put on the clothes of a milkmaid then he started to behave as a milkmaid,” Uskov said of the performances, adding that the people who took part in the performances ranged from successful businessmen to the homeless. “It was a way of feeling the emotion of that time.”

“Pozorishche” runs at the Na Solyanke Gallery until Saturday. 1/2 Ulitsa Solyanka. Metro Kitai-Gorod. Tel. 621-5672, www.solgallery.ru.

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