The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Garage Museum at 10: A Contemporary Art Refuge

By Guy Archer

June 27, 2018



Press Service

In spite of all of its bluster and hard work to portray itself as a thoroughly "modern" city, Moscow falls flat in a couple of conspicuous areas — one notably being its contemporary art scene, at least by international standards. Put in the perspective of a city with such a large population, the number of museums that qualify as truly contemporary is quite small. Actually, that number is just about one, by most people's reckoning.

The Garage Museum of Contemporary Art has been the shining exception, and this month it celebrates its 10th anniversary. It was founded in 2008 by Darya Zhukova and her (then) husband, the billionaire Roman Abramovich. (They have said that they will continue to work together as co-founders in spite of the split.) It describes itself as the "first philanthropic institution in Russia to create a comprehensive public mandate for contemporary art."

Besides functioning as a museum that consistently earns international recognition for its often bold and inventive exhibitions, it supports ambitious research, educational, publishing and archiving programs. On any given day, Garage hosts lectures, concerts, workshops and movies. In a city obsessed with prestige and being in the right crowds, there's a bit of a scene about the place – lots of hipsters and trendy people mill about the galleries, lobby, bookstore and café. Because of its nearly sole role in the contemporary art scene, it needs to be so many things to so many people. And it does so admirably well.

Garage takes its name from its original location — the famous Bakhmetevsky Bus Garage designed by the constructivist architect Konstantin Melnikov. (That building is now home to the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center.) In 2012, it relocated to Gorky Park, in a pavilion designed by Shigeru Ban. Three years later it moved to its permanent home, also in the park. It was an interesting concept indeed: Garage took a dilapidated Soviet modernist building that was built in 1968, one which housed the famous Vremena Goda restaurant, and reconstructed it into a contemporary art complex. The project was designed by Rem Koolhaas, the founder of OMA, and the original building was enclosed in translucent polycarbonate. Now a central part of the vibrant life of Gorky Park, the museum had 700,000 visitors last year.

Walking a Careful Line

Besides being a genuinely contemporary museum, Garage is also highly unusual in the Moscow museum and cultural framework for being independent of all state funding. This gives them a freedom that practically no other cultural institution in Russia enjoys. Garage's programs and exhibitions have hardly shied from controversy, but they also do not shy away from more massive popular appeal.

Last autumn, Garage took the unusual step of dedicating all its massive gallery space to the popular Japanese artist Takashi Murakami for an exhibition that lasted through the winter. The museum was literally covered in his colorful images and works, and often Garage looked more like a huge play area — Murakami even designed a sliding board for children. (Playfulness is a big part of Murakami's works, but then again, so are images of atomic holocausts.) The event was hugely popular, with long lines forming to enter Garage for the entirety of the exhibit. But some criticism was snarky: It was too popular, too much for the masses, too unchallenging. And yet, in a city where there is so little actual connection to the international contemporary art scene, Garage was providing a program and wonderful entry point with one of the world's most important artists, sliding boards and all.

Education is a fundamental mission of Garage, on top of its work as a contemporary museum. Essential in this has been very serious work to teach Russia about its own contemporary art history. One of the first things Garage did was to host a large exhibition of the works of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov. The Kabakovs fled the Soviet Union and became major international artists, though remaining largely unknown in their native country. Abramovich, Zhukova and Garage not only organized the milestone exhibition, but also convinced the Kabakovs, arguably Russia's most important living artists, to return to Russia for the first time to take part in it.

A recent exhibition — titled "If Our Soup Can Could Speak: Mikhail Lifshitz and the Soviet Sixties" — celebrated the 50th anniversary of the publication of a famous and thought-

provoking Soviet study and attack on pop art. The exhibition was ambitious, and it provided a context for understanding the critic Lifchitz's polemic against this genre of art. Rooms showed the journals that the critic read, the artwork he studied and appreciated. Other rooms showed Soviet art of the time; moreover, other rooms showed the very pop art Lifshitz attacked. Remarkably, both significant Soviet and Western pop contexts were presented in a balanced and thoughtful way that truly edified its diverse audiences.

The Garage public library is the largest specialized library in the country dedicated to 20th and 21st century art, with about 20,000 items. It is made up of monographs, catalogues of exhibitions, books on artists, contemporary art and architecture journals and cultural theory journals.

Much of the library is dedicated to materials studying and cataloging the "unofficial" art of the Soviet era. Before the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, artists who did not keep in line with state tastes and cultural ideologies had to go underground. Like the Kabakovs, they often moved abroad. Many of the artists created their work in secret. When the country's borders opened, much of that artwork went flying out, devoured by foreign art collectors and auction houses.

Today, Garage plays an essential role in cataloguing these works and helping Russian and foreign audiences understand and appreciate these heritages.

It must also be said that Garage has done a fine job of making itself a nice place to hang out. It has its café and excellent bookstore. In the summer, it used to show international art films on its roof; then it built a separate facility for movie screenings.

In ten short years, Garage has made itself the vital contemporary art resource of Russia.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/06/27/garage-museum-at-10-a-contemporary-art-refuge-a61961