

INTRODUCTION

The word “stability” was often used to describe the reality of Russia during the last decade. Everything about this stability seemed predictable and well-functioning—stable economical growth resulted in rising prosperity, which created a middle class, the requisite base for stability. In its turn, this middle class was satisfied by the authoritarian, but predictable political regime of Vladimir Putin. It seemed that the rules of the game were established and nobody was about to challenge them, at least not seriously. Many within Russia began to make comparisons with the stagnation of Brezhnev’s 70s, which was described by Soviet philistines and the pessimistic *intelligentsia* as a sad but quiet “end of history.”

With the passing of the decade, the Putin-led “end of history,” just as all others, proved to be another ideological *tour de force*. It became clear that the economic growth was fake, based on nothing other than unreliable oil prices. The Russian middle class felt deprived of the future, and political upheaval swiftly entered the sleepy social space.

The mass political protests at the end of 2011—early 2012 questioned the base of the unstable post-Soviet contract between power and society—social insensitivity, brutal market-

driven individualism and abstention from politics. This politicization had its limits, however. The most visible driving force behind early protests, the precarious “creative” middle class of big cities, the defense of liberties, was in fact sometimes defending its free access to international (“Western”) consumer goods, including cultural consumer goods, and the role of intellectual elites in a hierarchical non-democratic society (the rule of the 1% rather than 99%). The political agenda of the opposition was extremely heterogeneous. While leftists advanced social claims of free education and health care, as well as solidarity with migrant workers, the liberal mainstream of the movement tended to interpret civil rights as referring strictly to rights associated with free travel to the European Union, calling for the strict closure of borders with former Soviet republics of Asia.

What role can contemporary art have or take in such a multilayered context? During the Soviet period, contemporary art was underground and therefore “unofficial,” unknown or misunderstood by the public. By contrast, in the 90s, it tentatively formed bonds with self-proclaimed elites, the ultra-rich, and willingly or unwillingly legitimized their exclusive status. During the 2000s, in its depoliticized form, contemporary art acquired a new role in middle-class recreation and an “effective” tool of capitalist brainwashing. Already an ally of violent neoliberal transformation, and well established as a status symbol, contemporary art had to take up a role as the demarcator between the educated few and the non-initiated masses.

Against this very background, in the mid-2000s, a new generation of artists, curators, and art theoreticians emerged. They saw themselves in opposition to the dominant political and aesthetic orders, and stood behind some of the most visible events of political protest, including Occupy Abay in Moscow, the Open University, actions of solidarity with workers in Kazakhstan and Russia, anti-capitalist, anti-nationalist and anti-fascist demonstrations, and many others. Art seemed to become the very site of the political imagination where new, alternative, forms of opposition could be invented and tested. On its agenda, plural in its vectors, there was a rediscov-

ery of suppressed Marxism and iron-hard collectivity and solidarity, a defense of gay rights (extremely fraught in contemporary Russia), anti-clericalism, and understanding of economic precarity. It rehabilitates and re-appropriates Soviet anti-Stalinist cultural heritage in the very moment when all the remnants of Soviet welfare state and its ideology (free education, internationalism, critically-oriented and widely available culture and non-consumerist ethics of work, as well as architectural monuments of this era and mind) are massively attacked by both state and capital, and are about to vanish.

The post-Soviet state is at its end, there is a feeling of change in the air, but their direction remains unknown. *Post-Post-Soviet? Art, Politics & Society in Russia at the Turn of the Decade* is an attempt to describe a historical moment that is not yet fully understood. By placing dialogues with artists alongside critical texts by curators, scholars, historians and activists, this volume seeks to testify to the state of the spirit of change. The texts presented in this volume are of very different natures, they present various (sometimes contradictory) standpoints, and they were written in different moments between 2007 and 2013 (some are reprinted). Some of them are very recent, in which case history will shortly provide its necessary revisions, while others have predicted (or were trying) what is coming. In its varied form, this collection aims to show the dynamics of something difficult to grasp, an uncertain moment of instability which, as in many cases already known to us, might burst into revolution, or might easily return to the state of enforced stagnation. In either case, will art be equal to the historical occasion?