



# OF THE BROTHERHOOD NEW BLOCKHEADS

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MISHKIN GALLERY, NEW YORK



# INTRODUCTION

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The mid-1990s were a strange time to be a young adult in Saint Petersburg. The world had seemingly been turned on its head, as Russia had just passed through an enormous economic, social, and political transformation. Following the dissolution of the USSR, the state was newly adjusting to the global economy (before being hit with the 1998 financial crisis), while also pursuing the two Chechen Wars. Confronted with these tumultuous events, it was impossible to speculate what the future might bring. But to some that meant that both nothing and everything was possible.

Among these changes, an energetic group of mischievous young artists that included Vadim Flyagin, Oleg Khvostov, Vladimir Kozin, Alexander Lyashko, Inga Nagel, Igor Panin, Maxim Rayskin, Sergey Spirikhin and a rotating cast of locals who would hang around Borey Gallery, would come together as the Brotherhood of New Blockheads. Founded in 1996, they continued to spontaneously stage over 100 ludic performances in private and public spaces until about 2002. The Blockheads found absurdity and humor in everyday objects and situations and transformed them into artworks they shared with one another. A cartoon doll or a frying pan could become the fulcrum for a day's worth of performances that dealt with their feelings towards the poetic and academic, apathy and bureaucracy, or the new capitalist abundance their generation had to come to terms with.

In *Teach Yourself to See* (1996), an early Blockhead performance based on philosopher Martin Heidegger's book *What is Called Thinking?*, members of the group were blindfolded and carried spoons with flaming liquid that hung out of their mouths. *What is Called Thinking?* summons us to reflect before acting, to slow down and engage in discourse about what it means to produce original thought. If we wish to learn how to think for ourselves, we must first unlearn what we have previously been taught. What better time to begin again than right after the turbulent political moment of the early 1990s?

As curator Peter Belyi states, "No documentation, however full and comprehensive, can ever recreate the unique sense of physical presence." The artworks in *The Brotherhood of New Blockheads* cover the period from 1996 to 2002 during which the group was active and primarily consist of documentary materials, ranging from video, photography, and archival notes, to props and performance remnants. Produced in direct collaboration with the artists, curators Peter Belyi and Lizaveta Matveeva, and our partners at Kunsthalle Zürich, the exhibition responds to the lack of scholarly research on the Blockheads and brings this little-known art history to an entirely new audience. The spontaneity behind many of their performances also suggests that the artists did not thoroughly consider the possibility that their work would be archived or exhibited two decades later. The Blockheads were clearly living in the moment.

This exhibition is the very first presentation of the Blockheads' work in the United States and comes during a time of strained relations between this country and Russia. Bringing this previously almost unknown chapter of art history to New York and presenting it in the academic environment of Baruch College and CUNY, we hope that their work, energy, and humor will continue to inspire the next generation of artists, poets, and thinkers.

First and foremost, thank you to the Blockheads for their incredible generosity and creativity. Thank you to curator Peter Belyi and assistant curator Lizaveta Matveeva who told me about the Blockheads in 2015 during a visit to their Luda Gallery in Saint Petersburg. Their dedication to the artists and the preservation of the archive has allowed the materials to take on a new life. Daniel Baumann and Rebecka Domig from Kunsthalle Zürich have been gracious and supportive partners in helping to transport the exhibition across the Atlantic; the project would have been impossible without them. The Trust for Mutual Understanding provided generous travel support for the artists and curators, recognizing that their presence for the installation and opening in New York is extremely valuable. I would like to extend my gratitude to Performa for including *The Brotherhood of New Blockheads* in the 2019 edition of the Performa Biennial. And finally, my sincere thanks go to Baruch College, specifically Dean Aldemaro Romero Jr. and the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences for their day-to-day support of the Gallery and to the brilliant team at the Mishkin Gallery: Dino Dinçer Şirin, Višnja Begović, Shanelle Gomez and Eline Mul.



# THE NEW BLOCKHEADS — A SOCIETY FOR THE FUTURE

PETER BELVI  
GUEST CURATOR

This “archival” exhibition The Brotherhood of New Blockheads (1996-2002) is special, being the first time the group has been presented officially on the international stage. In what way is the legacy of the Blockheads of interest today? It is in part quite logical, for it was born in a time when a deficit in the present and a crisis of utopian ideals made looking to the past the only source of hope. In keeping with their own time, standing apart from any fixed styles or trends, The Brotherhood of New Blockheads was everything we could want of art: daring, despairing, naive, radical. Their legacy is relevant today for it provides a model for frank and uncompromising artistic behavior, for maximum sincerity, something which is so keenly lacking in the world today.

In structure the group anticipated art’s current desire for interdisciplinarity. Its authors or members (Vadim Flyagin, Oleg Khvostov, Vladimir Kozin, Alexander Lyashko, Inga Nagel, Igor Panin, Maxim Rayskin, Sergey Spirikhin) all came from different spheres, from the worlds of sculpture, philosophy, design, and literature. They were united not by a common style, but by their way of life and ways of thinking. Many of their actions or performances involved not only the members of the Blockheads but some of the regulars at the group’s “parent” gallery, Borey: idlers, drunks, artists, poets, and thinkers. A common aesthetic emerged from their search for a “new blockheaded view,” from reflections on life’s energetic pulse. This blockheaded view, suffused

with almost excessive humanity—in contrast to just about everything else around them—was encapsulated in the last line of Vadim Flyagin’s manifesto, “Long live all Creatures!” Flyagin was to be the model for the Blockheads lyrical hero. The predominantly literary approach of many performances was predetermined by the involvement of poet, philosopher, and hoaxer Sergey Spirikhin. With a taste for ritual parody, Vladimir Kozin created the meaningful basis for the performances, which he turned into something akin to a spiritual séance. Without any apparent effort, the Blockheads found themselves with their own journal, *Maksimka*, edited by Maxim Rayskin, with their own photographer, Alexander Lyashko, their own camp follower, Oleg Khvostov, and their own muse, Inga Nagel.



The Brotherhood of New Blockheads, *Teach Yourself to See*, 1996, photograph of performance action. Photo by Alexander Lyashko.

The time was the late 1990s and early 2000s, a very different time, when Russia was taking on a new form, and a period of as yet undefined hopes seemed to have arrived. A land of absolute prohibition had suddenly been transformed into a territory of barely defined borders, where everything

was permitted. Finding themselves amidst the ruins of the Soviet empire, liberated but superfluous, artists were forced to assume a new identity. Russian society's acute nervousness in the 1990s, people's insecurity, the reassessment of key concepts and principles such as freedom, truth, religion, and morals—all had its effect on artistic output. Capitalism's chaotic establishment in the new Russia was starkly reminiscent of the events surrounding the October Revolution in 1917, only the other way around. Revolutionary slogans—"Factories to the workers, land to the peasants!" "Against the bourgeoisie and the capitalists!"—were turned upside-down in the 1990s in accordance with the state's new ideology of total privatization. The slogans proposed by the Blockheads were always absurd or parodically pacifist, making meaningless the very concept of demands, apparently underlining the revolutionary tradition on one hand while on the other profaning the very essence of collective consciousness. A huge banner stretched across the entrance to the Manege Central Exhibition Hall in St Petersburg, "Go to hell, art lovers" tells of the artist's perpetual battle with the viewer, of the a priori comic narcissism of the classical concept of the artist, of the Nietzschean loneliness of the unrecognized genius seated proudly on a promontory. The interpretation of any situation—from a leak in the bathroom to the repairing of roads, from a demonstration to shopping for food—was immediately subject to a poetic form of critical assessment, and the readiness to create an improvised performance (or what the Blockheads called "actions") without prior preparation, suddenly, throwing themselves into it wholeheartedly, became what we might call the group's strategy.

Ordinary citizens, viewing them with a knowledge of the Russian tradition, saw them as holy fools and left them alone, while the police simply checked them out and moved on: some mysterious force seemed to protect the Blockheads, enabling them, absolutely unhindered, to set up

a desk on Palace Square in central St Petersburg, or to put out the Eternal Flame on the Field of Mars with an overcoat. Such petty hooliganism was not in the least malicious. Rather it seemed innocent, almost childlike. Thus emerged the image of a hero who looks upon the world with a strange, utterly uncomprehending gaze. The group burned with desire to be rid of all that had gone before, everything that had seemed to dominate—of the Soviet and the postmodern, even of the nonconformist. The underlying concept of their performance was, in essence, that the impossible is possible, and the burning liquid in the spoons was a symbol of the destruction of all barriers to comprehension.



The Brotherhood of New Blockheads, *Under the Bridge*, 1996, photograph of performance action. Photo by Vladimir Kozin.

For the Blockheads the idea of life as performance was based not merely on rapid recognition and assimilation of the Western artistic experience—something which swept through Russia in the post-perestroika period—but on deep-rooted local traditions, from the heroes of folktales to the classics of the Russian avant-garde. For the Blockheads, fabulous subjects and the performances *The*

*Sledge moves by Itself* and *Roly-Poly* overlap with the tradition of performative behavior as practiced by Russian Futurists such as Vladimir Mayakovsky, or with the absurdist poetry of Daniil Kharms. *Victory over the Sun*, the famous Futurist spectacle performed in 1913 with designs by Kazimir Malevich, verse by Velimir Khlebnikov, and music by Mikhail Matiushin, could well have been one of the Blockheads' own actions. Think of their multi-part *Guppy, Stonemasons, and Gardener* which, like *Victory over the Sun*, had its scenography that multiplied the absurdity of the 1990s by the absurdity of the participants' actions, set in a jazz restaurant. Actions such as *The Movement of the Tea Table Towards the Sunset or Under the Bridge*, which unfolded in historic sites, on the one hand made the city into a traditional backdrop and on the other made it a full participant in the performance.

The Blockheads' performative practices—and there were more than eighty extended performances and an endless number of smaller ones—encompassed every aspect of the surrounding world. Active transformation of post-perestroika Russian society and the world was reflected in the Blockheads' activities as in a mirror. Current issues such as politics and religion took on a parodic tragic significance, as if children were playing at being grown-ups. Their reaction to the war in Chechnya was *Laundry Day*, to war in Yugoslavia—*Slavic Bazaar*. Always emotional, always energetic. The washing of the Russian flag, a naive attempt to wash away shame, or the pools of bloody borsch that symbolized the bombing of Serbia, were in keeping with the idea of the “blockheaded” view, a desire to do something, to take a position. Russia's new emerging ideology was immediately subjected to the artists' critical assessment, but most of the Blockheads' actions were jolly affairs: the merriment of survivors of the collapse of a house, looking forward with hope to the building of a new one. That was probably why the names of so many of the Blockheads' performances start with the word “Russian”: they even came up with the overall

title *Central Russian Elevated Stupidity Project*. The word “Russian” is quite deliberate, in this instance acting as a sign, a subconscious desire to appropriate new experience, to do it themselves, to re-invent.

Purely practical aspects of the period—the deficit of foodstuffs and consumer goods—dictated a certain asceticism of style. The objective world of performances by the group was very simple: an electric hob, a saucepan, a table, a chair, a candle, insoles, a bucket, and spade. Sometimes it was the very lack of objects that dictated the content. The simplest foodstuff became a symbol, taking on meanings that are not always entirely comprehensible today. Everyone was familiar with hunger and a limited range of food back in the USSR. It took a while to get used to capitalist abundance and so in the mind of post-Soviet man food retained something of the sacred, cult object.

Preparations for the display of the Blockheads’ archive took several years. Small retrospective shows often served as an introduction to larger exhibitions, showing them as one source of a new stage in contemporary Russian art. From the very beginning, the Blockheads avoided an agenda of protest against the powers-that-be that was characteristic of nonconformist art in the USSR (Ilya Kabakov, Erik Bulatov and others) and had reached its natural conclusion along with the ending of “official” art. What replaced it was essentially a new kind of critical attitude, often expressed as a kind of empathy, in which the artist does not set himself up against society but rapidly becomes part of it, part of any of its manifestations. Preserving collegial ties, armed with the naivety of the untaught but talented provincial who hungrily absorbs everything they come across, the Blockheads advanced into the unknown, into the very newest and latest history of art. That time of utter freedom bordering on anarchy and the extremely favorable creative climate allowed them to exist unfettered,

making them—to many—a model of the unsullied artistic consciousness.

Performance is one of the most difficult subjects to present in an exhibition. No documentation, however full and comprehensive, can ever recreate the unique sense of physical presence. The inevitable loss of the work's *aura* of which Walter Benjamin wrote has particularly relevance to performance: hence this retrospective is but an attempt to create a model of something elusive. The inherent and insuperable conflict between the retrospective exhibition, which unintentionally gives everything a commemorative or memorial tone, and the incredibly vivid, living phenomenon that was *The Brotherhood of New Blockheads* presents the curator with the task of creating corridors of meaning to help spectators find their way, of seeking points of reference in the current situation that resonate with the period in question. Over the fifteen years that have passed since the group broke up, much of what they did has been shown to have passed the test of time and indeed often seems almost prophetic. The light-hearted mood of the majority of their performances reflected not only the age in which they took place but the very nature and meaning of artistic and human existence.



# THE BROTHERHOOD OF NEW BLOCKHEADS — THE TURN TO THE SELF

LIZAVETA MATVEEVA

TRANSLATED BY SASHA ZUBRITSKAYA

Revisiting performances of the Brotherhood of New Blockheads over fifteen years after the group dissolved, one inevitably starts looking for clues that offer some context: bits of evidence of their age, their susceptibility to clichés, or the not pointless idea of artists as voices of modernity. The Blockheads were such a voice. At first glance, they could be mistaken for late twentieth-century jesters or buffoons. Their farcical actions, striking frivolity and unapologetic appeal to the Saint Petersburg tradition of absurdity may create the impression that the Blockheads reveled in city folklore. While these qualities can certainly be found in their work, they do not adequately reflect the complexities of the group's willful obtuseness, as summarized by Igor Panin, one of the founding members: "Blockheaded life leads to a blockheaded way of seeing, the blockheaded way of seeing leads to blockheaded art, and that is harmony."

Invoking events that immediately concerned their audiences, the Blockheads sang songs of heroic deeds, praised whatever they wanted, and scolded whomever they wanted. In fact, they played the role of a critical authority that could reach many people. Like the folk singers that developed out of a culture devoted to rituals, the Blockheads conjured up images and stories that are reminiscent of folk art and the sacred sphere, for example, in the kinetic installation *The Sledge moves by Itself* (1998) or the performance *Roly-Poly* (1999), in which Vadim Flyagin repeatedly climbed

onto a group of chairs and threw himself on the floor until his body was covered with bruises. In another action, *Blessed Easter Sunday* (1999), the naked artists staged an Easter picnic out in nature. But behind the guise of the buffoonish and farcical, the Blockheads wittily and steadily raised fundamental questions: What roles do mass media, the arts, and religion play in society? How do Russian politics really work and what are their outcomes? The group served cocktails with guppy fish to jazz club visitors (*Guppy, Stonemasons and Gardener*, 1996), appropriated different forms of news consumption (*100 Ways of Using Mass Media*, 2001), nominated the cartoon figure Cheburashka as a candidate for the Legislative Assembly (*A New Image of a Leader*, 1998), placed a red arrow with the word 'Exit' on it under the dome of Smolny Cathedral (*Arrow*, 1996), laid down a wreath for contemporary art on the eve of the Saint Petersburg Contemporary Art Biennale opening (*Wreath*, 1996), and obsessively washed the stains out of a Russian flag (*Laundry Day*, 1996). Artists are often seen as jesters or holy fools, but the real value of their work lies in offering an alternative view of reality. Mikhail Bakhtin wrote that many of the familiar theatrical genres of folk culture were originally associated not with laughter, but with the magical features of primitive society, with chants and invocations. In a similar way, the Brotherhood of New Blockheads refers to the ritualistic, even to paganism, while resorting to laughter as an instrument for "distinguishing truth from falsehood".<sup>1</sup>

The performances of the Blockheads seemed to be ceremonious acts designed to either exorcise the devil or appease nature. While they embraced the image of the artist as a prophet, they were not interested in the concept of eternity. On the contrary, they embodied ideas of presence and of being fully dedicated to this existence in the now. In their performances, the Blockheads dissected modernity by telling tales and performing scenarios that probed what it means to care about *being*. The work of the Blockheads

emphasized the importance of an awareness of the present moment, which we tend to neglect when the future is the main focus of our concerns.



The Brotherhood of New Blockheads, *Blessed Easter Sunday*, 1999, photograph of performance action. Photo by Klavdia Alexeeva.

The Blockheads mimicked life by appropriating and transforming everyday situations in ways that bring to mind the writings of Roger Caillois.<sup>2</sup> They incorporated common materials such as garbage, food, fabrics, and organic matter into their performances and portrayed daily life with a twist: they poured borsch not into bowls, but right on the tablecloth (*Slavic Bazaar*, 1999), smuggled used soil from Saint Petersburg to Poland to plant sausages instead of flowers (*Flowers of Russia*, part of the *Central Russian Elevated Stupidity Project*, 1998, Poland), built a monument to a mosquito (*Liteiny Mosquito*, 1997), read essays “on the masterpiece and the nature of the masterpiece” out loud while marching around a pot in which a pig’s head boiled (*The Inevitability of the Masterpiece. Dinner/Conference*, 1997), and picked the habit of installing their artworks in toilets (*Series of Travelling Toilet Exhibitions*, 1996). The Blockheads

forced audiences to turn their attention to a distorted reflection of their own lives.

This kind of detachment from everyday life is necessary for developing a perspective on one's place in the world. While pretending to be holy fools, the Blockheads served as a mirror for being, which is not something that flows in time, but, on the contrary, is time itself, as Martin Heidegger has argued.<sup>3</sup> The group advocated for recognizing the finitude of being and for assuming responsibility for one's actions. Our fear of ourselves and our possibilities makes self-reflection difficult and conceals the uniqueness and finitude of being-in-the-world from us. In their first performance, *Teach Yourself to See* (1996), which was based on Heidegger's ideas about studying how to think, the Blockheads established the direction and backbone not only of their creativity, but of *being* in general: "We must be ready to learn thinking."<sup>4</sup> Sometimes you don't need a degree, or books, or movies, quite often you just need to return to the question of *being* itself and face it fearlessly.

1. Vissarion Belinsky quoted after Mikhail Bakhtin: *Rabelais and His World*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1968 (Russian original published in 1965)
2. Roger Caillois: *Man and The Sacred*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2001 (French original published in 1939)
3. Martin Heidegger: *Being and Time*. Albany: State University of New York Press 2010 (German original published in 1927)
4. Martin Heidegger: *Country Path Conversations*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2010 (German original written in 1944/45; first published in German in 1995)



The Brotherhood of New Blockheads, *Sandwich*, 1996.  
photograph of performance action. Photo by Alexander Lyashko.

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