

Brian James Baer and Yevgeniy Fiks, eds., *Queer(ing) Russian Art: Realism, Revolution, Performance*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2023. 402 pp.

Although recent years have seen a rise in queer scholarship in Slavic Studies, relatively few such works have tackled the region's visual arts. Yet, as coeditors Brian James Baer and Yevgeniy Fiks note astutely in their introduction to *Queer(ing) Russian Art: Realism, Revolution, Performance*, "there could be, perhaps, no more apt time for a book on this subject" (12). Indeed, since the establishment of the Russian Federation's "gay propaganda law" in 2013, homophobia and transphobia have become more pronounced than ever in official Russian discourse. In the United States, too, recent and ongoing shifts in the political climate have placed queer people and scholarship under increasing pressure. Meanwhile, in both Western and post-Soviet contexts, the culture surrounding art history has been plagued by revisionist attempts to downplay or altogether erase the importance and influence of queer artists and queer art—see, for example, the 2019 Amazon prime series *Amazing Leonardo* and Kirill Serebrennikov's 2022 biopic *Tchaikovsky's Wife*, each of which has been criticized for a (mis)handling of well-documented homosexuality. It is more important than ever, therefore, to reassert and continue to develop scholarship on queer art and artists.

This volume is a far-reaching collection of scholarship and criticism on queer beauty in Russian and Soviet visual arts. The editors position the book's approach from two main disciplines, Visual Studies and Queer Studies, and feature contributors with backgrounds in both fields. With immense collaborative effort from the authors and translators, the volume confidently treads the often-uneasy ground of cultural mediation; more than half of the contributors write from post-Soviet contexts, and many identify themselves and/or their artwork as somehow queer. This emphasis on authentic Slavic and queer voices preempts the common criticism (and significant pitfall) of queer theory's clumsy application of Western ideas to Slavic contexts. Per Baer and Fiks, "in adopting analytical approaches associated both with Russian/Soviet culture and the West and by bringing together a group of scholars working both in Russia and abroad, the volume hopes to avoid the persistent postcolonial dynamic by which enlightened Western scholars 'explain' Russian culture to Russians" (11).

Fiks further explores the issues of East-West queer discourse in Chapter 14 with his conceptual art piece *Soviet Union, July 1991*, a script for a performance layering 1991 and 2015 public discourse on queer sexuality from both domestic activists and intervening Westerners, confronting the hypocrisies and "good intentions" that continue to reappear in such encounters. In the concluding interview with Fiks (Chapter 20), he responds to a question on the problems of applying terms such as "queer" across cultures by admitting that he feels "suspicious of the bohemian radical queer iconoclastic tradition," in which he sees also the importance of an intersection with class, quipping that "queerness goes out partying on a weeknight after gayness comes home from a ten-hour shift" (381). But,

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grounding the discussion in real consequences, he adds, “it doesn’t matter whether one calls themselves ‘gay’ or ‘queer.’ The real question is: Would one be subjected to prosecution and sentenced under Article 121 [Stalin’s law criminalizing male homosexuality]?” (381).

The problem of language is ever-present in Queer Studies, but despite this volume’s heteroglossia, it remains consistent and coherent. Individual contributors emphasize and explore myriad aspects of the “queer” domain across a broad range of artworks and timeframes, and, like Fiks above, many express nuanced and idiosyncratic understandings of queerness. Baer and Fiks facilitate this discourse with uncommon deftness thanks to their excellent introduction, which glosses important concepts and orients their approach vis-à-vis existing scholarship from adjacent disciplines; the introduction itself deserves praise as an excellent example of how to frame queer analysis clearly and robustly.

One of this volume’s greatest strengths is its breadth. Although some readers may prefer a more focused approach, it seems impossible that someone interested in Queer Studies *or* Slavic Studies (and, as such, anyone likely to be reading this review) could fail to find new and compelling ideas and information in this text. Organizing such diverse topics is, of course, a challenge. Accordingly, this text is divided into loose categories. “Part One: Theoretical Framings” consists of a single chapter by Baer, “Between Semiotics and Phenomenology: The Problem of Queer Beauty,” which follows the brief introduction with a more robust inquiry into the foundational questions and ideas at play in the rest of the volume and offers important historical-cultural context. The long history of queer beauty in Western art necessitates some foundational knowledge of antiquity, which produced fruitful sources of reference for Russian and Soviet artists. Baer cleverly establishes this context while simultaneously expanding upon the theoretical frameworks laid out in the introduction and so avoids the dryness that often plagues preambles of necessary historicization. On its own this chapter is a compelling piece of theoretical writing, but in context it excels by thoroughly initiating the reader into the conversations of the coming chapters.

“Part Two: Queer Beauty in Context” consists of a wide array of critical essays examining engagements with queer beauty from pre- to post-Soviet timeframes. Despite the range of topics covered, these chapters are well organized for reading in sequence; there is a loose chronological ordering, and figures who feature in multiple chapters (such as Georgy Guryanov and Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe) also provide some guiding through-lines for the broader historical narratives. These chapters are the “meat” of the volume, and cover in considerable depth an impressive range of media, themes, and histories.

“Part Three: Beyond Queer Beauty? Contemporary Post-Soviet Perspectives on Queer(ing) Art, Art History, and Artists” begins with two contemporary works of conceptual art. As well as Fiks’s *Soviet Union, July 1991*, the section features a concept piece by Georgy Mamedov and Oksana Shatalova, who use real archival materials to weave an intriguing fictional narrative surrounding an imagined late-seventies queer

commune in Frunze devoted to Kollontai and space travel. This part then moves onto three critical statements by Russian art historians (Victoria Smirnova-Maizel, Seroe Fioletovoe, and Nadia Plungian) concerning the “state of the field” of queer art and art history, and it concludes with three interviews featuring contemporary artists (Masha Godovannaya, Slava Mogutin, and Yevgeniy Fiks). These concluding chapters provide a meaningful reflection on the themes of the preceding chapters, problematizing the limits of language and themes in the open-ended ways so central to Queer Studies. At the same time, Part Three provides a serious forward-looking meditation on the continued development of those themes in the 21st century.

In sum, this volume is a remarkably successful and ambitious achievement—one that provides an excellent model not only for Queer Studies but also for any kind of collaborative, interdisciplinary scholarship. It is by no means an exhaustive text on the topic, nor is it intended to be. Rather, it is a well-structured and thoughtful contribution to the timely and eponymous project of “Queer(ing) Russian Art,” and one that is sure to inspire and inform further scholarship. As the authors note, the book represents not a comprehensive history, but “a first step not only in creating a history of queer Russian art and artists but also, following feminist art historian Griselda Pollock, in imagining queer interventions in art histories” (18).

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