



V I L L E D E
G E N È V E

PRESSRELEASE

Objet

Exposition Villa Sovietica Musée d'ethnographie de Genève 2nd of October 2009 – 20th of June 2010

This exhibition sheds light upon the practices of cultural interpretation by displaying a particular collection of Soviet objects in an unconventional way. The MEG has opened its collections to a team of anthropologist and artists from post-socialist countries like Slovakia, Ukraine, Russia or the former GDR, who gauged into the merits and perils of a cross-disciplinary approach into a specific type of material culture in collaboration with colleagues from formerly so-called non-communist countries (the West).

The result is a presentation of over 1000 items for everyday use of Soviet provenance, innumerable objects from the museum's European department and objects from Emmaüs in Geneva. The display at MEG Conches uses the villa as an exhibition object by drawing attention to the magnificent architecture of the building. Spaces that have never been accessible before are open to the public.

Villa Sovietica invites the audience to relate to objects in a physical and sensory way by providing different angles with which to look at *Sovietica* playing with preconceived ideas. It gives us fragments, remnants, emotional and visceral glimpses into a reality between the former "East and West" that cannot be intellectually grappled with except in fleeting and indirect ways.

On a voyage from the cellar to the attic of the former Villa Lombard and selected spaces in the city of Geneva the museal machinery is put under scrutiny by turning the attention onto the object. Be welcome. The red carpet will be laid out before you, but beware: you may lose your balance when trying to walk on it.

INTRODUCTION

ALEXANDRA SCHÜSSLER

At first the collection of Soviet material culture for everyday use owned by the Musée d'ethnographie de Genève was an imaginary one. Not yet living and working in Geneva I had already heard about it from museum staff. As I found out later the MEG's collaborators were actually describing the objects to me without having seen the latest acquisition themselves. They talked about a huge volume of items formerly used by *Homo Sovieticus*, millions of people being formed by the specific design of objects they were obliged to make do with; they mentioned an entire Stalinist living-room, certainly also a Trabant in one of the crates just arrived from Moscow, curious objects from another world...

With the keys to the museum storage and high expectations I set off in May 2008 to finally see the objects I was asked to exhibit in my position as the new curator of the European department. What I found was very different from what I had imagined: two tables, like the ones used at flea markets, and three shelves crammed with items from different Soviet epochs. Pieces of furniture scattered about the room. Everything looked dirty, used, shabby and ordinary. I recognized a few of the things from my childhood in Bratislava, still in Czechoslovakia back then. Viewing these unspectacular objects I felt that such "things" did not belong in the storage of a museum in Geneva.

If someone had asked me where this forlorn material culture did belong I could not have said. Should these remnants be sold for a dime on a flea market? Should they be returned to the people who had discarded them for nicer looking items appropriate to the winds of change? Or thrown on the garbage heap? Or kept for eternity in the depot of some ethnographic museum? I had no answer for these questions, but I was convinced that the pots and pans, toys and clothes, stools and sofas should not be exposed to a Western gaze. I did not want these objects to be displayed in front of an audience who would compare them with familiar items from another epoch of their own cultural horizon. They were not exotic enough for viewers to project on to them desires stemming from life in a post-industrial society.

Another problem was what or whom these pitiful material remnants should represent to the viewer. Whose point of view should the curator take? The (n)ostalgic stance of people who have spent an important part of their lives surrounded with these objects – sublimating them and displaying them like jewels for others to admire? It would have been truly ethnographic to celebrate them as tokens of a universe that has ceased to exist, framing them as exotic artefacts that need to be explained and (de)valued. Or should I demonstrate their ridiculousness as materialisation of "a" particular culture? None of these options seemed appealing.

My instinctive reaction proved right – as my fieldwork data would later show. I started to invite experts and laymen from in- and outside the museum to the storage to view the Soviet collection. Analysing their reactions, I concluded that my exhibition concept should forestall the visitors' attempts to carry off the exhibits as trophies of an alleged victory over a hated and feared political and economic regime. The exhibits, which were once everyday items in a different social context, needed protection against the consuming gaze, so much part of the capitalistic world and in particular of museums. Fulfilling my duty as a curator I was obliged to exhibit and not hide away the material culture I was in charge of. So I decided to opt for the strategy of camouflage: allowing the objects to be perceived and at the same time making them vanish.

In the display I intended not only to resist the collective memory of the Cold War, but also to interrogate an institutional memory in the sense of a reflection on museum canons. Visiting a museum, the audience usually expects to see what there is to see. My goal was to make clear that there is nothing to see except what the museum "produces". In this sense *Villa Sovietica* shows how the visitor's gaze is manipulated, how the frames of perception are produced by the institution. Moreover, the subject is usually expected to turn into "eyes-only" – as if the body could be left behind on a hanger in the cloakroom. Against this occulocentrism I strongly emphasize the corporeality of visitors in my scenography.

Exhibitions are spatio-temporal artefacts and looking is not the only way they can be experienced. Therefore I chose a display that would let visitors move through the house, a bourgeois villa built in 1889 in a residential area of Geneva.

Moving between the Eastern bloc and the West, I realised early on in my life that objects for everyday use produced in communist countries were not designed to compete with capitalist consumer goods – either in quality or aesthetics. I remember enviously watching my new classmates in an Austrian school drawing with thick Jolly or Caran d’Ache colour pencils. Oh, what saturated and vivid colours! The marks made by my socialist-produced Koh-I-Noor pencils were bleak shadows of Western colour intensity. Not to mention the fragility of the leads. My fountain pen leaked and my writing paper was hyper absorbent. Imagine the mess! Nevertheless I always managed to be among the best pupils in my class. I was ashamed only of my gym gear: a white T-shirt, so thin it was almost see-through, a pair of dark-blue *teplaky* (the socialist equivalent of jogging trousers) and white gym shoes. Nothing like the perfect, deep red, super elastic Adidas training-suit worn by Gabi Weiss, the best ballgame player. No wonder that I never played in the winning team with such an outfit and that everybody trampled on my toes during ball games.

I have probably made you feel sorry for this poor girl from the East with her wretched equipment. *Villa Sovietica* deals only with losers’ objects, when consuming means winning. But, to the disappointment of many, my childhood in a former satellite of the USSR was not at all traumatic because of some so-called “material lack”. So I figured that the subject must be constituted of something other than creative consumption. How do subjects construct themselves in societies in which the emphasis is laid on production and not on consumption? What happens to the human being when individuality is undermined by the monotony of consumer items spread over a large geographical area, the same items everywhere from Bratislava to Vladivostok? The question of how we relate to the material world runs like a red thread through the exhibition.

Unfortunately I was born too late for conducting extensive fieldwork in the Soviet Union or in one of its satellites; nevertheless my research trips for this exhibition took me to post-Soviet Russia, Ukraine, Slovakia and Romania. Even if I could have extended these relatively short stays in the field I would always have refused to “explain” the objects from the Soviet collection. Holding a discourse about the other means “making” the other and always implies an appropriation of power. Knowing that when talking about an anthropological research subject, there always remains a “rest” that escapes symbolization, I respect the other’s “obstinate otherness”, a term coined by Mattijs van de Port (1999), and I take the view that in my discipline it is only the relationships between subjects, and between subjects and objects that should be analysed. As I was primarily interested in how users relate to the objects that were once part of their everyday lives, I decided to build up a team of collaborators who had lived much of their lives in socialist countries. I was curious about their views of Soviet material culture (their history, as Yuriy Kruchak has pointed out to me) and their dealings with it within a Western museum context. Not unlike Roland Barthes (1980), who in *La chambre claire*, a text analysing the *punctum* and *studium* in photographs, puts himself into the position of a research tool, I sought to use my own sensitivity to the topic as a guiding line. But as an anthropologist I have to be aware of transfer and counter transfer and so I decided to check and contrast my estimations with those of others. And these others had to be people who knew the objects in question from their own day-to-day experience and who have also made the switch from Eastern to Western material culture. Furthermore I considered it to be important to bring these attitudes in contact with the Westerners’ point of view. This is why I invited artists, designers, photographers, theoreticians and scientists from different cultural contexts (and traditions of thinking) to work with me on the problem of exhibiting Soviet objects in a Swiss museum of ethnography.

A challenging and fruitful translation adventure started. Not only did our working language switch between Russian, Ukrainian, English, French, Dutch, German and Slovak, but many presumptions and preconceptions had to be translated if we were to reach a common understanding. Some of us were productive emitters and receivers, others gifted mediators – especially those who were strong in empathy and familiar with

travelling between cultures. “Alexandra skazala” (“Alexandra said” in Russian) and Yuriy Kruchak, a Ukrainian artist replied – always through Yulia Kostereva, his closest artistic collaborator. Apart from switching from one language to another, our working method was characterised by intensive networking and spatial mobility. We held meetings in Geneva, Vienna, Bratislava, Kiev, Utrecht, Amsterdam and Munich.

Due to our site-specific and context-bound working method, the MEG’s Conches villa turned into a starting point: it was our working site and necessary context. The building is so dominant aesthetically that it would be a sheer impossibility to silence the architectural structure – except by an act of violence. So my team and I chose to work with the building and not against it. Basing ourselves on a text by Gaston Bachelard (1991 [1957]), we emphasized the verticality of the temporary home of the Soviet objects. The polarity of cellar and attic is so stringent that it creates two different axes for the phenomenology of the imaginary. Visitors to the exhibition are asked to come in by the front door only to pay the entrance fee: they have no access to the hall, which potentially leads to other areas in the museum furnished for them to see. No, they are immediately sent to penetrate into the dark realm of the house, which guests rarely get to see. What was repressed comes to light.

The cellar: of course it has its functions and naming them is an attempt at rationalization. Nevertheless the cellar remains the dark space of a house, the unit that dwells in the chthonic depths, our humus. The imaginary evoked by this part of the house makes the irrationality of the depths accessible. There is an analogy between the process of constructing a house and the images that the individual spaces of the structure evoke in us. The basement is dug into the soil. The ground, which to us is limitless, encloses the space of the basement. Likewise, it constitutes a basic attachment to all other buildings having their fundamentals equally embedded in the ground. Here visitors discover a myriad of objects from the European collection of the MEG – and among them, somewhere, there are the Soviet items on display, the objects they have come to see. But if these foreign things are so specific in the visitors’ mind, it is left up to the visitors to find them.

In Bachelard’s view, the irrationality of the basement is opposed to the rationality of the roof. Only a thin layer of tiles separates this space from the limitless sky and the universe. The attic represents an intellectualized and, I would dare add, spiritualized space. This is why the makers of *Villa Sovietica* reserved it for production: first as a studio for the anthropologist and participating artists, and later, after the opening of the exhibition, as a space in which young and old could try out different modes of production. The only restriction for the visiting *bricoleurs* is that they must work with white material. At the opening the attic is rather empty. Over time it will fill up with the visitors’ production until it turns into a “white mirror image” of the basement.

And in between the two poles, cellar and attic, we have two floors. First of all, with the help of my museum collaborators, I dismantled the villa’s straitjacket of professional museum equipment. The black ceilings concealing the spatial dimensions (creating a black box effect) were painted cream. All the “theatre” lighting equipment had to disappear and most important the fake walls hiding the real architecture of the building of the house had to be taken out. I was longing to finally see the villa and show it to our audience. Many elements hardly anybody had seen before appeared in the light of day: beautiful fireplaces, wooden timbering, doors fetched from depots and store rooms and put back in their original places; light entered all the spaces and revealed what some people would rather have concealed. Taking off the wooden panelling in what once must have been the salon, we discovered a wall entirely covered with mould. This black surface was perfectly framed by two windows. Some of us were shocked, others delighted. I immediately framed this phenomenon, due to a rain-pipe problem which had remained unnoticed on account of the fake walls, as strangely beautiful. It looked almost like an abstract painting. Applying the curatorial principle of continuous change, unpredictability and loss of control, I took the decision to turn evil into good and to exhibit this extraordinary piece of wall behind glass. It was to stand as a metaphor for the discipline of anthropology, always interested in the hidden, people’s concealed drives and not the tidied up façade prepared for others to see. Being convinced of acting perfectly in

accordance with Geneva's motto *Post Tenebras Lux*, I failed to foresee that not everyone can bear the light. The reaction was swift and severe; with unprecedented speed "the dirt" was cleaned up and painted over. Some people seem unaware that a thin layer of varnish will crack.

We dirtied our hands again when we reached into the "humus", the manifold objects in the basement, and raised a number of specific items to the ground floor. They are represented by the singular collections on display at that level of the villa. We tried to find already existing collections or started to collect ourselves, taking specific *Sovietica* of the MEG's storage as a starting point. A threefold exploration of scientific, art and private collections raises the question of whether there is a right way to collect. It shows that the aims and strategies of collecting are various. And it demonstrates the fluidity of the frontiers between culturally legitimate and "wild" collecting.

The next floor of the building is a reflexion on how the museum makes its object, applied to the case of the MEG Soviet collection. Instead of reconstituting a "Stalinist living-room", the furniture of the collection is dealt with in a sculptural way. Entering the exhibition hall, visitors get to see only the shadows of the stools and tables, sofas and cupboards. The furniture arranged inside a white cube made out of textile, with a strong light source in the middle, can be viewed directly only if visitors climb the stairs and look down from above. Another installation consists of a Soviet item in a small showcase, which is exhibited in another showcase, which again is placed in an even larger showcase, and so on, until the largest showcase restricts the visitor's movement in space. In a condensation of the way a museum constructs frames of perception and manipulates the visitor's gaze, a Moskvitch toy car is put behind a closed door and can be seen only through a lens which magnifies the tiny object. Things are not what they appear to be.

Neither the exhibition *Villa Sovietica* nor the catalogue is designed to teach the visitor/reader about the meanings and functions of Soviet material culture. Rather these artefacts made by an interdisciplinary team of anthropologists, artists and designers are to be perceived as invitations to discover, play with and re-think our relations to objects – those of others and our own.

EXHIBITION TEXTS

Welcome to *Villa Sovietica*

The red carpet has been rolled out for the event and you are invited to come in. But mind your step! You will be treading on the heads of thousands of matriochkas packed tightly together to make a uniform red sea. At first glance, the tide of Russian dolls – not fitted snugly inside one another but placed side-by-side, from the largest to the smallest – looks easy enough to walk over. But appearances can be deceptive.

The matriochkas were made and assembled on the spot by Dutch designer Marcel Fanchamps with the aid of the museum team. They were poured into moulds one by one, left to harden and stockpiled until there were enough (over 52,000 and 600 kg) to make an even carpet. A carpet designed to keep you aware.

Introduction

The *Villa Sovietica* exhibition explores the practices of cultural interpretation and the way museums make their objects. By displaying a collection of Soviet objects in an unconventional manner, Alexandra Schüssler, the curator of the European Department of the MEG, working with artists and designers from post-socialist countries and Western Europe, invites us to relate to the items in a physical and sensory manner. She gives us fragments, remnants, emotional and intuitive glimpses into a reality that cannot be grappled with intellectually except in fleeting and indirect ways. Her exhibition concept emphasises the objects' materiality, rejecting occulocentrism, to involve all the senses.

The Villa, the exhibition's physical envelope, becomes a museum object in itself and its least nooks and crannies are bared for all to see. As in the theory developed by Gaston Bachelard (*The Poetics of Space*), the Villa is seen as man's first world, built in his likeness. It is divided into strata, like a vertical being, rising from the cellar to the attic. The basement, the first stage of the exhibition, reflects the dark part of the mind and irrational fears. Creating an underground network with the houses around it, it also symbolises the collective subconscious. Conversely, the attic is the bridge between man and heaven, the rational, intellectualised part of the soul. A staircase passing through the two storeys links these poles in an upward movement.

Cellar - Objects

The exhibition starts in the Villa's basement, which is usually out of public sight. In the meanders of the cellar, they discover an overloaded space, cluttered with all sorts of ordinary, everyday objects. The installation in the cellar tries to upset visitors' preconceptions of Soviet material culture. The items of the Soviet collection are scattered through things taken from the store rooms of the MEG's European Department or picked up at Emmaüs before ending up at the garbage. They are hard to pick out. Visitors may see Soviet objects but have trouble distinguishing them from the rest. Are these objects really different from Western objects?

Humus

The MEG's collection of Soviet objects for everyday use is shown in the basement of the Villa. These artefacts were collected for the Museum between 2006 and 2008 and are the starting point for the *Villa Sovietica* exhibition. In the underground installation also a large number of non-Soviet objects from the MEG's reserves and the second-hand store of Emmaüs are on display: everyday things from the West, selected as reflections of the Soviet objects. The space is saturated to the extreme by the dense forest of objects that visitors have to struggle through. In this subterranean place, rooted in the earth and humus, the spectators are made conscious of the weight of the environment in which they live: an environment saturated by the material and perceptible. Even if the objects change according to time and cultures, their tangible presence is an anthropological constant. Displayed in the gloomy, disorderly, stagnant setting of the basement, the objects are debunked: if these museum pieces, these

characteristically Soviet objects were so special, wouldn't they be easier to recognise?

Cucushka, Cucushka...

A Soviet cuckoo clock hangs at the bottom of the stairs. Every half hour the cuckoo pops out and calls. The sound is amplified and audible throughout the museum. The clock is part of a daily ritual: it has to be wound up and set to Swiss time every morning by the museum staff. The cuckoo clock or cucushka, an installation by Ekaterina Shapiro-Obermair, makes a link between Switzerland and the Soviet Union.

Groundground Floor - Collectors

This floor is usually the first part of the museum that visitors see, but this time it is the second stage in the exhibition. Soviet objects are displayed here as items in a collection, raising questions about the collecting process itself. Is there a right way to collect? What

is the point of collecting things? How and why is a particular object chosen? How should they be exhibited? Nine private collections— scientific, artistic or personal – are on show. Each one brings together many pieces of a Soviet object that was present in the accumulation of objects in the cellar. Someone, somewhere, decided to collect one piece from the overwhelming mass of products, to sublimate it and label it as “an object worth seeing”.

So, like a living-room in a private house, a place for entertaining where the host likes to show off his collection, the ground floor has been designed to be the heart of the Villa. The rooms stripped of museum display devices and lit by chandeliers give the impression of a house that is lived in. The ground floor – the only place in which the objects seem accessible – is the second stage on the way up to the attic.

The Solo-Mâtine Collection

Comprises over sixty versions of Cheburashka, a highly popular Soviet mascot. Initially the hero of a children's story written by Eduard Uspensky in 1957, Cheburashka was drawn by Leonid Shvartman in 1967: a strange animal, unknown to science, unlike his distant cousins Mickey Mouse and Pooh Bear. The child-sized creature with big ears was found in an orange crate, so the story goes. The collection put together by the artist can be divided into three categories: the Cheburashka from the Soviet period (until 1991), a real mascot or child's soft toy, made in all sorts of materials; the contemporary Cheburashka (since 1991), the emblem of the Russian Olympic team and significantly branded “made in China”, symbolising a new era; and the Japanese Cheburashka obeying the codes of Japanese consumerism and declined in a whole range of gadgets. Solo-Mâtine came across Cheburashka on a stroll through a flea market one summer. So it was in a jumble sale, that place of discovery where the relics of childhood lie alongside astonishing things that dig into the past and tell the true stories of nameless obscure people, that the artist came face-to-face with little Cheburashka. Solo-Mâtine has used the mascot as her inspiration for several fashion collections, videos and performances.

The Jean-Jacques Kissling Collection

In 1992, wandering for the first time through the bustling flea market of Apraksin Dvor in St Petersburg, the photographer Jean-Jacques Kissling was surprised to see a badge with Lenin's face on it and he bought it. He has been collecting Lenin badges ever since and now he has about 250. His last acquisition was made in 2000, because since then he has turned up only duplicates of pieces already in his collection. His badges are meaningful for him, even if he is not particularly attracted by the historical figure. In particular, they reflect the period when Lenin was regarded as a hero and his portrait could be seen everywhere – in the street, in private homes, in public buildings. The badges could be

bought for a song (thanks to government subsidies) in any bookshop. Apart from Che Guevara or Mao, no public figure has been “reproduced” more than Lenin. Even today he symbolises the socialist revolution. These badges also have an aesthetic value: the design and materials have changed over time with successive interpretations by well-known Russian designers over a period of seventy years. Lenin’s face has thus become a veritable logo. Today Jean-Jacques Kissling is proud to see his badges on display in a museum such as the MEG. It brings official recognition that gives him a chance to get even with all those who have made fun of his quaint collection.

The MEG Collection

Includes a multitude of Soviet figurines and trinkets used to decorate the New Year tree. After the socialist revolution of 1917, Christmas and other religious festivals were banned by the Bolshevik regime. Regarded as a religious symbol, Christmas trees were abolished three years later. However, they turned up again in 1935, renamed New Year trees, and were decorated to celebrate the coming of the New Year. Two years went by and several orthodox Christmas rites were reinterpreted for the New Year festivities. A Soviet New Year tree standing fifteen metres tall was erected at the Moscow Palace of Trade Unions. In 1947, the first of January became a public holiday and an official feast day. The star of Bethlehem traditionally placed at the top of the tree was replaced by the red Soviet star. Various objects were used to decorate the tree: during the war, soldiers, parachutists and tanks were popular. After the famine and scarcity of the post-war period people hung papier-mâché fruit or vegetables on the tree. Obviously animals and fairytale or cartoon characters, such as Father Frost (the equivalent of Father Christmas) and his daughter, Little Snowflake, also have their place on the New Year tree. From 1960, strong public interest in the cosmos led people to decorate their trees with tiny glass and aluminium cosmonauts.

The Yuriy Kruchak and Yulia Kostereva Collection

The collection presents films and slides from the Soviet epoch, spanning the period from 1950 to 1990. It includes propaganda for the Communist Party alongside children’s fairytales. Most of the films were produced by Soviet companies but many of the slides were made by private citizens. The impetus for the collection came from the conflict between the official vision of the future and the voices of people which put a different slant on the course of events. It offers a sociological analysis of the order and structure of daily life at the time, in which the past can become an image of the present and project an alternative idea of the future. Anthropology establishes a link between fiction, desire and reality; between propaganda, fairytales and personal stories. The collection was put together with the idea that history is made of historical events and private actions. Motionless we can skip back and forth from the past to the future; the time frame becomes subjective, linked to our standpoint. This dynamics reflects the contemporary experience of the post-Soviet area, in which ideological changes and shifts in position plunge us into a space saturated by artefacts from the different ideological systems. It reveals the fickleness of an experience based on a fixed time in history as well as making it possible to see reality from several points of view.

The Ekaterina Shapiro-Obermair Collection

In contemporary Russia, paper dress-up dolls are perceived as a Soviet invention although in fact they have existed for two hundred years. The popularity of these two-dimensional dolls has always risen in times of economic crisis, in the 1930s in the USA or the 1980s in the Soviet Union for instance, and may be linked to a scarcity of material goods. The industrially produced dolls were dressed mechanically, with the aid of lugs or notches, or by means of magnets. The dress-up game was designed for children from five to eight and was

supposed to educate their taste and help develop their fine motor skills. Until the 1980s, the dolls were depicted as children. From 1990 they grew into young women, in Barbie doll style. As well as the printed clothes, there were “do-it-yourself” outfits as Soviet design did not meet people’s longing for modern aesthetics. The collection presents 300 models of paper clothing designed in Moscow in 1991–1993 when consumer goods were scarce. For Ekaterina Shapiro-Obermair, who was around twelve at the time, these homemade outfits were a substitute for things that she could not buy. She drew her models with felt pen on ordinary paper, broadening her range of materials with green insulation tape and using old nail varnish as glue. *Telenovelas* such as “The Rich Also Cry” (produced in Mexico since 1979) or “Simply Maria”, in which the main character is a fashion designer, had a strong influence on the young creator. In the Soviet Union, Latin American soaps were broadcast on television from the late 1980s and had a major impact, giving people their first glimpse of private life and wealth under capitalism.

The Tobias Glaser Collection

Utilitarian objects are three-dimensional images. Their developments formulate their own evolutionary stories. Razors for instance provide a particularly striking demonstration of the point of contact between the individual and technology. Where else but on the object itself can the relationship of the individual to his / her artefacts be described, examined in respect of its functional, product-language parameters, and put into its socio-cultural context? Since the time of the Arts and Crafts movement such objects have been collected professionally in museums. Today they show the index fossils of the history of design, i.e. things that hardly anybody ever had. Tobias Glaser on the other hand is concerned more with the foot soldiers of design history, those objects which as he sees it can provide reliable information about the way design attitudes are reflected in the reality of life. In his view, they are underrepresented in collections and publications. In the context of his teaching on questions relating to product and brand design, the design theorist has built up his own collection of samples. He seeks items in places where they are used on a daily basis: in households, in their temporary storages such as cellars and garages and at places where such things change hands like flea markets. Design attitudes and processes can be far better read from these objects, and – in both senses of the word – grasped: from the razor to corporate identity.

The Alexandra Schüssler Collection

In May 2008 the cultural anthropologist Alexandra Schüssler started to work with the Soviet collection of the MEG, which was collected between August 2006 and October 2008, in an anthropologically obsolete framework of holism. The logic behind this collection was “to save the remnants of a culture, which is about to disappear.” Singular specimens, allegedly representing a whole category of objects, can be found in this collection. For example there are only two Soviet tea-glass holders, both acquired in Moscow, destined to celebrate the official history of the Soviet Union. Alexandra Schüssler, the curator of the *Villa Sovietica* exhibition, used the case of the *podstakannik* (tea-glass holder) to correct the image of “vanishing” Soviet culture. Starting from September 2008 she managed to collect sixty-nine tea-glass holders for the MEG. The aim of this collection was to show that these items were not rare, but still made and used in large numbers in various social contexts, over an enormous geographical area: from Kiev to Moscow to Novosibirsk and beyond. By collecting for a predefined purpose, the anthropologist sought to demonstrate the large variety of forms the tea-glass holders take. Roughly they can be divided into three categories: very common aluminium or stainless steel models, found in every home; official glass-holders made of nickelsilver produced to mark historical and political events or jubilees and mainly used in trains, by the bureaucratic apparatus or as official presents; and, since the 1970s a third class of “elite”

tea-glass holders often silver plated with fine filigree work, used in the private sphere. The subjects depicted on them are mainly folkloric: fairy tales, legends, city emblems or floral patterns.

The Larisa Bilous and Évelyne Mégevand Collection

Matriochkas go back to the nineteenth century. The artist Sergey Maljutin made the first sketches in 1890. “Matriochka” is an affectionate diminutive of “Matrjona”. These days, the dolls in their traditional costumes symbolise the passage of the generations from mother to daughter – and thereby fecundity. Larisa Bilous, an Ukrainian artist, originally from Odessa, not only collects the famous dolls, but also produces and sells them, passing her knowledge on to the next generations. She will make doll sets to order, decorating them with family portraits or company logos. The “Matriochka Mother” drew her inspiration from a stay in a Russian village near Moscow, where she was teaching art – and particularly handicrafts and toy making – at a secondary school. During the long cold winter evenings, when there was no farm work to be done, whole families painted wooden toys. Larissa painted her first doll in 1989. She was inspired by works of other artists in the tourist markets of Moscow. She believes that the creator of a doll-set puts her soul and positive thinking into her work. Évelyne Mégevand sees her matriochka collection in another way: “A collection? That is a grand word! A passion, certainly.” Indeed, she has a sentimental link with her dolls, who have become her “family”, each one carrying a story or a memory. The dolls in her collection are mostly old and plain, bought or given to her over the years. Some she picked up during her travels, especially to Prague, Berlin, New York or even in Switzerland. Others were gifts from her friends and family. She prefers simple matriochkas with basic colours and no superfluous decoration. Évelyne Mégevand’s collection is therefore highly personal, put together with love and enjoyment, for decorative not scientific purposes. Without seeking any official recognition, she admits to being very happy to exhibit her collectibles.

Veranda

The strings of onions hanging in the veranda call on another sense: smell. This place echoes the carpet at the entrance, suggesting – vertically this time – the idea of a uniform mass of almost identical individuals. Although they vary in size and shape, each one loses its own identity and blends into the group, becoming part of the whole. As a symbol of passing time, the onion decays, layer by layer. Each layer reveals a new one, rather like a matriochka. But the onion also symbolises fertility and rebirth, because it contains the germ of new growth just like a museum object locked away in the reserves, waiting for a new life to begin.

First Floor - Anthropologists

The first floor aims to deconstruct the machinery of museum display. The Soviet objects are presented here in a self-reflective way: instead of being displayed in show-cases which show them to advantage, they are hard to see and hard to approach. Following on from the previous strata, the first floor questions the ways an object can be presented and tries a new approach in which the eye, the tool of distance and distancing, is no longer the only instrument needed for a visit of the museum. Here the entire body is involved in a suite of rooms, the last step before the final climb to the attic, the summit of the exhibition.

Once again, visitors are invited to become aware of their bodies and are obliged to shake off their passiveness by stepping into a destabilising space: a corridor obstructed by a long series of doors. A corridor is usually a clear passageway. Here it is cluttered and visitors must find a way to reach the last door, which is fitted with a lens. Peering through it, a car can be perceived –

a desirable object in the East as in the West. Like a fish-eye lens, the optic device distorts reality and lets the voyeur look without being seen. In fact the car is tiny but it seems bigger because it is enlarged by the magnifying glass. Any object, especially in a museum, can be put on a pedestal. What the eye sees is held to be a true testimony, but this installation shows that reality is often twisted and reframed.

Here visitors are greeted by a white fabric cube with shadows playing over the surface. The installation excludes the spectators and hides the objects, letting them see only a faint distorted image of them – their shadows. They are lit by a strong light shining inside the cube. However, visitors can ease their frustration by stepping out of their passivity and climbing a ladder. The objects – Soviet furniture – can be seen from above. Once again, the spectators' gaze is directed and framed. But even then they are denied direct access to the objects, which are only partly visible. The furniture, all Soviet, comes from different periods and styles. Refusing to present this disparate set as a whole, as if it were in a living room, the installation turns it into a piece of sculpture.

Invaded not by objects but by sound, this room is almost empty and contains only one tangible object: a radio set. From this Soviet object comes an endless stream of applause. Sometimes loud, sometimes soft, this acclamation goes right through the spectator, or listener, whose sense of sight is complemented or replaced by the sense of hearing. The endless clapping recalls the compulsory applause that follows totalitarian political speeches. A perpetual cheer goes up, because each person is afraid to be the first to stop clapping. So the applause is even, blending the noise made by each person into a mass of sound. The radio set has been repaired so it really broadcasts the sound; it presents a facet of Soviet "re-consumption" in which utilitarian objects are constantly recycled and often used for a different purpose. Mass applause, applause for the object and the museum process.

In this room, visitors find an inaccessible object, locked away like the last doll in a family of matriochkas. The show-case, which usually magnifies and displays what it contains, is here multiple, putting an absurd distance between the spectator and the object. Questioning traditional museum display, this installation crystallises a host of possible framings. It shows that a showcase manipulates and directs the spectator's gaze just as a photograph does. Visitors trying to reach the object have to enter the exhibition space through another door as the show-cases block the access from the hall. Due to the narrow passageway between the show-cases and the wall they become conscious of their bodies and their physical presence in the same time-space as the object, and are frustrated to be unable to approach it. In the centre of the installation, lost in the multitude of show-cases, is a trolley whose contents cannot be seen. It is a meta-object, because it contains all the others, an instrument for consumers and travellers, reminiscent of the exhibition and its journeys back and forth between East and West.

Attic - Artists

After going through an accumulation of objects (basement), arbitrary, orderly selection (ground floor) and synaesthesia (first floor) the visitor is invited to take material part in the exhibition. Indeed, *Villa Sovietica* seeks to lift visitors out of a position of exclusively visual consumption: instead of expecting a readymade explanation, they are encouraged, through discussion with others, to work out their own answers. Based on the idea that a human being cannot live without creating, the last floor is an open workshop in which the spectator becomes an actor. An inverted mirror of the basement, the attic is the realm of the intellect in which thoughts become clear. Thus on this floor with its

exposed beams the house is stripped bare and only a thin layer of tiles separates its entity from the sky and universe.

Clouds

Like a spiritual reflection of the cellar, the attic will fill up with things in a very tangible way. However, it will gradually be peopled as the exhibition goes on. Empty at the beginning, the room invites visitors to install their own creations in the immaculate space before them. Empty shelves stand ready to take the new collection of things and ideas. The visitors help build the exhibition, collaborating in this manner with the team from the Musée d'ethnographie. They have complete creative freedom except for one formal constraint: everything must be white. Various materials – plaster, papier mâché – moulds and the tools are provided for the spectators-cum-actors in the logical continuation and climax of the exhibition. Mind and hand are united in materialising the idea. Open to all, young and old, the collective studio will be in operation throughout the exhibition. On the day that *Villa Sovietica* closes, the objects will be taken home by their creators to begin a second life.

Garden

When visitors enter the grounds of the MEG Conches, they see an immense carpet of flowers which seems to have been planted by the city parks and gardens department. The pattern in the garden beds is indecipherable at ground level but when viewed from the top floor of the Villa it falls into place as the head of Lenin. Floral pictures are a long-standing tradition in the Soviet Union and are still popular today. The portrait of Lenin was designed by the Ukrainian artists Yulia Kostereva and Yuriy Kruchak. Using the idea of the *subbotnik*, a day for voluntary community work in the USSR, they invited the people of Geneva to come to the museum on 3 October 2009 and plant the flowers in a likeness of the founder of the *subbotnik*. But, in keeping with the leitmotif of camouflage which runs throughout the exhibition, the artists did not tell them what picture they were planting. Volunteer workers from all social backgrounds had time to mix and talk about art and culture while they were working the soil.

ARTISTS, DESIGNERS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS

Marcel FANCHAMPS graduated in woodwork and furniture-making from the Academy of Fine Arts in Rotterdam in 1996. He specialised in interior architecture and furniture design. He works as furniture designer and maker, interior architect and architect in Amsterdam.

Tobias GLASER's professional background is rooted in architecture; since 1996, he has been working as independent consultant in the realms of branding, marketing and design and as an exhibition curator. Since 2000, he has been lecturing in history and design theory. In 2007, he opened the project kiosk "Odeon-K67" – independent platform in the public space for architecture, design and art" in Munich.

Yulia KOSTEREVA (born in Kharkiv, Ukraine in 1973) studied art at the Industrial School, Moscow region, Abramcevo, Russia, from 1988 to 1989. From 1989 to 1992 she was educated at the state art school, Kharkiv, and from 1992 to 1998 she studied at the Art Industrial Institute, in Kharkiv. In 1998 she studied graphic art as part of an interdisciplinary postgraduate programme at the National Academy of Fine Art and Architecture in Kiev, Ukraine. She had residence in KulturKontakt Austria, Vienna in 2009. Group exhibitions: 2009 "The search for hidden stories, and the fatigue of those who know..." Gallery Art Point, Vienna, "This is the Future Before it Happened", The Glendale College Art Gallery, 2008 "Ukrainian Citizens, Neighbours and Strangers", Queens Nails Annex, San Francisco, USA, 2007 "Sintezija", Writers Union of Lithuania, Vilnius, Lithuania.

Yuriy KRUCHAK (born 1973 in Poltava, Ukraine) lives and works in Kiev, Ukraine. From 1982 to 1989 he studied at the Poltava Fine Arts School, from 1989 to 1991 he studied at the Kharkiv State Fine Arts School and from 1991 to 1996 at Kharkiv Art Industrial Institute. From 1996 he did a postgraduate course at the Ukraine Academy of Fine Arts in Kyiv for three years, he had residences in the Academy of Fine Arts, Nuremberg, Germany in 1998 and in KulturKontakt Austria, Vienna in 2009. Kruchak is one of the founders and members of Open Place platform. Personal exhibitions: 2008 "Underground of Heaven", Municipal Gallery, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 2004 "Coca-cola and Sacred War", Studio Gallery, Kiev, Ukraine, 1999 "O.T.S.E.", OPPOSITE Gallery, Kharkiv, Ukraine. Group exhibitions: 2009 "The search for hidden stories, and the fatigue of those who know..." Gallery ArtPoint, Vienna, Austria and "This is the Future Before it Happened" The Glendale College Art Gallery, 2008 "Ukrainian Citizens, Neighbours and Strangers", Queens Nails Annex, San Francisco, 2007 Next Festival 007, Railway station, Vilnius, Lithuania.

Willem MES (born in Rotterdam in 1958) graduated in 1990 in photography at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, Netherlands. Now he lives and works in Utrecht and is specialized in portrait and documentary photography, and commissioned work for national and international clients. He has made photo installations in cultural institutions in the Netherlands and for a NGO in Lusaka, Zambia. His work has been published in *Pilgrimages in Europe* (1998) and *The European Landscape* (2002–2004).

Ekatarina SHAPIRO-OBERRMAIR (born in Moscow in 1980) is a visual artist based in Vienna, Austria. In 1998 she left Russia and studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Nuremberg. After graduating in Germany she continued her studies in the fields of photography, performing arts and sculpture at the University of Arts in Berlin, the University of Applied Arts and the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Since 2004, she has lived and worked in Vienna. In 2005–2008 she organized and conducted excursions to Moscow which focused on the Russian art and cultural scene as well as the contemporary art market in cooperation with Gallery Knoll (Vienna/Budapest). In 2008 she edited

the book *Das große Moskau, das es niemals gab* in cooperation with Wolfgang Obermair.

Johnathan WATTS, after a period in advertising photography in London (1983–1992), became the official photographer of the Musée d'ethnographie de Genève in 1993. He is a specialist in still life photography and has contributed to many publications on the museum's collections, notably, *Le Monde et son double*, *Saris de l'Inde*, *Théâtres d'orient*, *Bambous Kanak* and most recently *Medusa. The African Sculpture of Enchantment*. Johnathan Watts has also taken photographs in Africa and has made two documentary films on the sacred arts of Kerala in southern India.

RENDEZ-VOUS AT THE MUSEUM

Exhibition

Villa Sovietica

2nd of October – 20th of June 2010

Preview

1st of October 2009 at 6pm

Guided Tours

Public

En français / *in English*

First Sunday of every month at 11 am

Free admission

For groups

To register contact

T +41 (0)22 418 45 90 E publics.meg@ville-ge.ch

Schools

To register contact

T +41 (0)22 418 45 90 E publics.meg@ville-ge.ch

Free for schools in Geneva

Guided tour for teachers

7th of October 2009 at 2:30 pm

Atelier Blanc

Every Saturday and Sunday at 2 pm, starting from 11th of October 2009

Visit of the exhibition *Villa Sovietica*, followed by a workshop initiating the participants into different modes of productions. Objects are created as works of art, handicraft, in series and as mass production.

Duration 2, 5 hours

Free admission for children, parents pay an admission fee for the exhibition.

To register call +41 (0)22 346 01 25

Calendarium Sovieticum

In order to structure the entire duration of the exhibition *Villa Sovietica* the MEG celebrates specific Soviet holidays, to which you are cordially invited at following dates:

3rd of October 2009: Subbotnik

7th of November 2009: Anniversary

of the Great October Socialist Revolution

1st of December 2009: Creation of the Women's International Democratic Federation

21st of February 2010: for the Day of the Soviet Army and Navy

7th of March 2010: for the International Women's Day

11th of April 2010: for the Day of the Cosmonauts

24th of April 2010: for Lenin's Birthday

1st of May 2010: International Workers' Day

9th of May 2010: Victory Day of 1945

18th of May 2010: International Museum Day

1st of June 2010: International Children's Day

5th of June 2010: Day of the Ameliorators

12th of June 2010: Day of Light Industry

With the participation of Larisa Bilous, François Burland, the team of Emmaüs, Tobias Glaser, Stephen Hedley, Franziska Jentsch, Yulia Kostereva, Yuriy Kruchak, Willem Mes, Alexander Petljura, Alexandra Schüssler, Solo-Mâtine, and many others...

Exhibition

Cadrer l'EST

18th of September – 8th of November 2009

MEG Carl-Vogt

“Cadrer l'EST” is presentation of photos taken during anthropological fieldwork. They focus on Soviet material culture in post-socialist countries.

All the information and the programme are available at:

Accueil des publics

T +41 (0)22 418 45 90

publics.meg@ville-ge.ch

www.ville-ge.ch/meg

PUBLICATION



Villa Sovietica introduces us to the material culture of everyday life in post-socialist countries. After a visual essay – exploring various contexts in which ordinary Soviet objects appear – thirteen authors from different disciplines and academic traditions in the post-Soviet and Western worlds compare their points of view on aspects of materiality and spatiality, East-West relations, the history of the Soviet artefact, photography, memory and collecting, finally emphasising the complementarities between anthropology and art.

Table of Content:

Yuriy said... Alexandra skazala, Alexandra Schüssler

IMPORT- EXPORT: VISUAL ESSAY, Willem Mes, Johnathan Watts et al.

Soviet Spatiality :Contrasting Impressions, Irène Hermann in collaboration with Berthold Unfried

Touched by Things, Maartje Hoogsteijns

Ironic Nostalgia or the Aesthetics of Survival, Franziska Jentsch

In Addition to a History of the Soviet Artefact, Mitya Kozlov

The Right to Cheburashka, Polina Ermakova and Andrey Rossomakhin

Why the Socialist States Failed in Respect of Design, Harry Lehmann / Wolfgang Ullrich

Chaos Collectors: Collecting Soviet - Style, Alexander Kulyapin and Olga Skubach

The Object of an Object: Photography, Nicolas Crispini

Engaging the Object - Exhibiting the Past, Alyssa Grossman

The Other Side of Objectivity: Art and Correspondence in Ethnographic Exhibitions, Peter Bjerregaard

Epilogue: From Imaginings to Reflection, Boris Wastiau

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CAPTIONS AND CREDITS FOR PHOTOGRAPHY

01

Office of Alexandra Schüssler at the MEG
Switzerland, Geneva
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02

Box at 'Ports Francs' containing objects of the MEG's Soviet collection
Switzerland, Geneva
© Photo: Willem Mes

03

National Architecture and Life Museum, house from the region Zaporizhzhâ, village Bilen'ke,
porcelain in a cupboard
Ukraine, Pyrogovo
© Photo: Willem Mes

04

National Architecture and Life Museum, house from the region Poltava, village Kagarlyk,
store-room with the belongings of a guard
Ukraine, Pyrogovo
© Photo: Willem Mes

05

Shop at the market near to the Central Railway Station
Ukraine, Kiev
© Photo: Willem Mes

06

Shop in a container at the market near to the Central Railway Station
Ukraine, Kiev
© Photo: Willem Mes

07

Kitchen interior
Ukraine, Kharkiv
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08

Toy Moskvitch camouflaged among other toy cars
Ukraine, Kharkiv
© Photo: Willem Mes

09

Objects at the CCCP Museum
Russia, Novosibirsk
© Photo: Willem Mes

10

Strawberries sold opposite of the Central Market, near Ulitsa Krylova
Russia, Novosibirsk
© Photo: Willem Mes

11

Sport trousers sold opposite of the Central Market, near Ulitsa Krylova
Russia, Novosibirsk
© Photo: Willem Mes

12

Women with plastic bag at Ulitsa Krylova

Russia, Novosibirsk

© Photo: Willem Mes

13

Veranda of a house at the countryside

Ukraine, Lubotyn

© Photo: Willem Mes

14

Shop with household articles at the Lenin Market

Russia, Novosibirsk

© Photo: Willem Mes

15

Object of the MEG collection at the flea market

Ukraine, Kiev

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16

Objects at the flea market

Ukraine, Kiev

© Photo: Alexandra Schüssler

17

Figurines de porcelaine au marché aux puces

Ukraine, Kiev

© Photo: Alexandra Schüssler

18

Soviet slide films at the flea market

Ukraine, Kiev

© Photo: Alexandra Schüssler

19

Objects at the flea market

Ukraine, Kiev

© Photo: Alexandra Schüssler

20

Garbage at the flea market

Ukraine, Kiev

© Photo: Alexandra Schüssler

21

Tropical fish at the flea market

Ukraine, Kiev

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22

Window of a textile shop

Slovakia, Kešmarok

© Photo: Willem Mes

23

Soviet furniture at the MEG storage
Switzerland, Geneva
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24

Soviet furniture at the MEG storage
Switzerland, Geneva
© Photo: Willem Mes

25

Objects for everyday use at the MEG storage
Switzerland, Geneva
© Photo: Willem Mes

26**«Cosmonaut» decoration for the New Year's Tree**

Ėloc' naâ igruška «Kosmonavt»

URSS, 1970's

Glass, aluminium. H 7 cm

Acquisition, collection Lada Umstätter

MEG Inv. ETHEU 064554

© Photo: MEG, Johnathan Watts

27**Bucket**

Zinc, H 27 cm

Acquired in Stara Lomnica, Slovakia, 2009

Acquisition, collection Alexandra Schüssler

MEG Inv. ETHEU 065636

© Photo: MEG, Johnathan Watts

28**Fluffy toy Cheburashka, Ceburaška**

URSS, 1966–1980

Polyester, synthetic material. H 31 cm, L 36 cm

Acquisition, collection Lada Umstätter

MEG Inv. ETHEU 064665

© Photo: MEG, Johnathan Watts

29**Vodka set «Carp Family»**

Nabor dlâ vodki "Semejstvo karpov"

URSS, Ukraine, Hmel'nyč'kyj region, Polonne, 1970–1975

Porcelain. H 27 cm et 7,5 cm

Acquisition, collection Alexandra Schüssler

MEG Inv. ETHEU 064873

© Photo: MEG, Johnathan Watts

30**Toy car Moskvitch-Pikap**

Model' avtomobilâ Moskvic'

URSS, Leningrad, Agat Factory, 1983–1989

Metal, plastic. L 10 cm

Acquisition, collection Lada Umstätter

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31

Logo «Villa Sovietica»

Graphic Concept: Séverine Mailler

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