

Late Soviet Material Culture: Things and Objects between „Rural“ and „Urban“

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The growing field of Late Socialism studies has been focused predominantly on urban areas. Such topics as social and ideological dynamics, mass housing and everyday life, design and aesthetics, subcultures and rituals, have been mainly discussed in relation to socialist cities. Rural areas, on the other hand, appear in the narratives of „depeasantization“ or „erosion of the village“ and „ruralisation of cities“. In contrast, this conference addressed the topic of the late Soviet village as not only disintegrating, but also showing its specific agency and entangled with the city in numerous dynamic ways. Believing that the study of rural areas is crucial for understanding the history of late Soviet Union, EKATERINA EMELIANTSEVA KOLLER (Zurich) recently launched the research project „Late Soviet village“. This multidisciplinary international project aims to explore „modes of self-perception of Soviet people in rural settings between Soviet promises of urban modernity with its technological advance and new consumption culture on the one side, and the legacy of collectivization and local peasant traditions on the other.“ The conference, convened in the University of Zurich on 14 December 2018, was one of the initial steps of this project. It brought together historians, design historians and anthropologists for addressing the issues of late Soviet rural developments.

The one-day conference accommodated three panels that showed a diversity of approaches to the late Soviet village and its interconnections with the city. In the introduction, Koller called for an alternative periodization of late Soviet history based not on political leadership but on the modes of interacting with objects. The following panel, entitled „Materialism(s)“, opened with the presentation by SERGUEI A. OUSHAKINE

(Princeton). Advancing the notion of things as agents of social life, characteristic for the interdisciplinary trend known as new materialism, Oushakine identified two distinct approaches to things in late Soviet culture. The first, critical approach, was presented by comical sketches and popular literature on the „socialist way of life“. The second, positive approach, can be traced in the leading design journal „Decorative art of the USSR“. Both approaches put forward the term „veshchizm“ (thing-obsession), but if the former reproached it as unhealthy dependency, the latter relied on the avant-garde tradition of viewing things as comrades and encouraged the careful exploration and mastery of material environment. The discussion about the principles of modern domestic environment, promoted by „Decorative art of the USSR“, was „the last conscious attempt to translate avant-gardist utopian visions to the language of everyday practices“, Oushakine explained. On the example of the evolution of Soviet furniture design from the 1960s to the 1970s, this talk demonstrated the centrality of material objects in aesthetic considerations of the late Soviet generation of intellectuals. The triumph of functionalism in late Soviet design generated the anti-functionalist reaction and the widespread interest in antiquarian and ornamental objects: thus, late Soviet objects appeared not only as „comrades“ in rationalized everyday life, but also as symbols of prestige. As Oushakine concluded, „the struggle against things proved to be the struggle for things.“

In the following presentation, ALEXEI GOLUBEV (Houston) explored the role of objects in socialist practices of selfhood. Analyzing oral history interviews taken in North Russia, archival materials, and popular Soviet press, Golubev argued that the „vibrant material“ of Soviet everyday life – from crowded buses to swampy soils to self-organized basement gyms – escaped the schemas of official discourse and resisted the Party and governmental directives. To explain the social effects of materiality in late Soviet society, he borrowed Friedrich Engels’s notion of „naturwüchsiger Materialismus,“ canonically translated to Russian as „stikhiinyi materialism“ („elemental materialism“). The late Soviet

materialism was „elemental“ in the sense that it embraced „the entangled assemblages of bodies, objects and physical spaces that exercised social agency but did not necessarily originate from the dominant order of ideology“. This elemental materialism gave room to the development of the avant-gardist understanding of iron as the symbol of bodily strength and hygiene and facilitated the parallel development of Soviet bodybuilding and orthopedics in the 1970s and 1980s.

The second panel, „Things and objects“, focused on Soviet design as profession and theory. YULIA KARPOVA (Budapest) presented her work in progress on Soviet designers' attempt to rationalize the material culture of Soviet rural areas. She started by arguing that the Khrushchev-era „aesthetic turn“, discussed in Oushakine's talk, was first and foremost about regimenting everyday materiality: „turning unruly and malfunctioning things that filled Soviet homes and warehouses at that time into neatly functional objects.“ The All-Union Research Institute of Technical Aesthetics (VNIITE), established by the Soviet government in 1962, aimed at overseeing all the design bodies and services in the country, establishing universal design concepts, methods and guidelines. At the beginning of the 1970s, VNIITE unfolded a large-scale research program on nationwide consumption patterns in urban and rural areas, with the aim to set appropriate assortments of consumer goods for each region, raise the standard of rural living and thus to curtail migration to cities. The Leningrad branch of VNIITE was responsible for covering the Northwestern economic region, and in 1973 a team of Leningrad designers conducted a pilot study of consumer behavior in four rural settlements in the Novgorod region. Even though the designers refuted the role of patronizing experts and were careful not to approach the interviewees with preconceived notions, the fieldwork significantly challenged their idea of social distinction and consumer patterns in a socialist countryside. As Koller rightly suggested, trying to find those interviewed villagers is necessary for understanding this ambitious campaign.

ALYONA SOKOLNIKOVA
(Moscow/Stuttgart), too, dedicated her

talk to VNIITE but covered a broad range of design projects produced in this institution from the 1960s to 1970s. In this period, Soviet design theory transformed from strictly functionalist, oriented at aiding the planned economy, to more diverse and capacious, including postmodernist visions of urban and rural environment. These new visions were conceptualized through the term „artistic projecteering“ which pointed to the expressive and creative aspects of design. While only few innovative design ideas could be implemented during the Brezhnev-era economic stagnation, „artistic projecteering“, practiced in small creative groups and at design seminars organized by VNIITE and the USSR Artists' Union, allowed unrestricted thinking about the harmonious interactions between people and material objects. This activity, according to Sokolnikova, can also be termed „artistic design“ in the sense that it underlined emotional properties of objects and the individuality of their potential users. A vivid example of this type of design is „Soulful or Psychological furniture“, developed in 1986 by the VNIITE employee Irina Presnetsova. Inspired by the tradition of peasant art that did not separate between function and decoration, by fairytales and at the same time by Sci-Fi and research and artificial intelligence, Presnetsova designed a series of symbolically rich furniture pieces and ensembles. These objects at once expressed the personality of the author and invited emotional interaction that could be different and unique for each user. Furthermore, Presnetsova aimed to materialize meaningful connections between different objects in an interior and to incorporate old objects and materials into new designs. The careful attitude to history and tradition, shared by many Presnetsova's colleagues, was often combined with the interest in the rural lifestyle, where thrift and emotional attachment to old belongings prevailed over desire for new commodities.

The final panel comprised anthropological studies of late Soviet rural areas. The first speaker, ANNA SOKOLOVA (Zurich), presented the first results of her field research, conducted in the Muezersky district of the Republic of Karelia. She observed several typical forest settlements located in the woods

not far from timber production plots with the aim to determine whether their inhabitants in the 1960s to 1980s followed rural (agricultural) or urban (industrial) lifestyle patterns. In order to attract qualified timber workers to the North-Western Karelia in spite of its harsh weather conditions, in 1947-49 the Soviet government issued resolutions on providing decent living and working conditions. Among the directives of these resolutions was the development of social infrastructure (housing, schools, ambulance stations, etc., prior to the launch of the timber production). This development progressed over the 1960s and presupposed urbanized lifestyle: for example, the design of houses in the settlements did not include any agricultural facilities and resembled American suburban houses rather than the traditional rural housing of Northern Russia. The timber enterprise administration also took care of providing leisure activities for timber workers such as open air holiday festivities, a range of tours and access to vacations in the socialist bloc countries and even, in some cases, cruising along the Mediterranean. However, the field research revealed that many worker families preferred rural patterns of life: they often opted for keeping cows in spite of the lack of good meadows in the area, and therefore spent their vacations making hay rather than cruising abroad. It transpired that while white collar workers of the North-Western Karelian settlements had much lower salaries than timber workers, they were more inclined to choose urban-like everyday patterns due to the larger amount of free time. The timber workers, on the other hand, used their scarce free times keeping cows and hay making – even though they were the initial target group of the urbanized lifestyle. However, from the mid-1970s, a younger generation of skilled workers departed from the peasant habitus of their parents much due to the highly urbanized housing infrastructure built by that time: five- to nine-storey apartment buildings with conveniences. Therefore, the presenter concluded, the infrastructure ultimately did provoke lifestyle change among industrial workers.

A literally consumable object was at the center of the study by TYLER ADKINS

(Princeton). Talkan, a traditional staple food for the Altai people of southern Siberia made of barley kernels in animal fat, is produced since the 19th century and consumed as a powder added to tea, along with salt, milk, cream or butter. Simple as it may seem, talkan „elicits complicated reactions from contemporary Altai people“. In the Soviet period, homemade talkan was a crucial part of everyday rituals in the region. The commercially produced talkan that appeared in the 1990s has largely failed to meet the ordinary people's expectations: many informants of Adkin's fieldwork complained about its low quality and lack of flavor. Rather than the sign of Soviet nostalgia, this sentiment can be interpreted as the affective object embodying „tectonic historical shifts“. In the narratives of today's rural inhabitants of the Altai Republic, talkan appears not as an inanimate object but as a protagonist. This vision of talkan extends the concept of a „biography of an object“, introduced by avant-garde literary critic Sergei Tretiakov in 1929. Tretiakov imagines a form of the novel centered not around a character, but on the production cycle of an object as it travels through the chains of manufacture, distribution and consumption. Whereas Tretiakov's „biography of an object“ has inspired a number of recent studies that focus on the dynamism of objects as agents of social change, Adkins reveals the invariance as the main aspect of this avant-gardist concept. In the changing political, economic and social circumstances in the Altai region, Talkan plays the role of the stable, reliable object – a „stationary sun“, to borrow Tretiakov's expression. Therefore, Adkins argues, inertia can be a positive trait: it provides continuity between the socialist past and the post-socialist present that people often strive for in times of change.

Finally, CRAIG CAMPBELL (Austin) gave an overview of stories of natural objects in the Evenkiia municipal district in central Siberia. In particular, the story of the project of the hydroelectric dam on the Lower Tunguska river that was twice proposed and twice suspended over the 1960s to 1980s (and is still being discussed) points to the conflict between the state's vision of technological progress and the everyday experience of indeterminacy.

The Soviet state's „anti-colonial colonialism“ expressed in a grand industrial project created the „holding pattern“ (with the term of anthropologist Jerry Zee) in the Evenki villages: „kind of an affective repertoire of ordinary life waiting for something big to happen“. This pattern, however, was not only oppressive but also productive: it generated new acts and habits, „new regimes of fear, hope, and governance“ (here the presenter quoted the anthropologist Vivian Choi). Furthermore, the river life, affected by indeterminacy, can be read more expansively as the human society: it should include various animals and inanimate objects. The unimplemented and ever-anticipated Evenki dam, therefore, presents a valuable case for exploring „the ecology of a not-only-human world“. Building on Serguei Oushakine's term „patriotism of despair“, Campbell proposed considering the despair of rural life in „industrial edgelands“ next to the „vitalist glimmer of little hopes“ that comprise the „aesthetic of endurance“.

The conference exposed many questions regarding the geographic, cultural and social topography of late Socialism. It revealed that objects and their affects can have different and changing configurations in rural and urban locations, that the borderline between urban and rural can be dynamically shifting over time, but that objects can also play the role of invariable anchors changing political and economic regimes. It revealed the different visions of the social role of things in different professional groups and generations. The project „Late Soviet village“ goes on to track these trajectories.

Conference overview:

Welcome address & introduction

Ekaterina Emeliantseva Koller (University of Zurich)

Panel I: Materialism(s)

Chair: Anna Sokolova (University of Zurich)

Serguei A. Oushakine (Princeton University)
Veshchism: What did we know about New Materialism before it became fashionable?

Alexey Golubev (University of Houston)
Elemental Materialism in Soviet Culture and Society

Comment: Craig Campbell (University of Texas at Austin)

Panel II: Things and Objects

Chair: Tatiana Voronina (University of Zurich)

Yulia Karpova (University of Aarhus/Budapest)

„Stabilizing objects“: developing product design guidelines for Soviet North-Western countryside, 1973-1975

Alyona Sokolnikova (Moscow Design Museum/ Stuttgart)

A Secret Life of Things: experimental concepts&objects of the late Soviet design

Comment: Ekaterina Emeliantseva Koller (University of Zurich)

Panel III: Nature and Landscapes

Chair: Ekaterina Emeliantseva Koller (University of Zurich)

Anna Sokolova (University of Zurich)

Urbanizing the woods: timber industry settlements in late Soviet Karelia

Tyler Adkins (Princeton University)

Talkan in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: The History of the Senses and the Senses of History in Altai Republic, Siberia

Craig Campbell (University of Texas at Austin)

Communist Cement: Theses on late Soviet Industrialism and the Siberian Pastoral

Comment: Alexey Golubev (University of Houston)

Concluding discussion

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