

Günter Hirt and Sascha Wonders, eds. *Kulturpalast. Neue Moskauer Poesie und Aktionskunst*. Wuppertal: S-Press Tonbandverlag, 1984. 155 pp., audiocassette and card set, boxed. DM 48. [Avail.: Jägerhofstrasse 199, 5600 Wuppertal 12, German Federal Republic.]

Most Americans read poetry, if at all, in silence, from a book. In the Soviet Union, where many of the best poets cannot expect to see their best works in print, poetry is encountered much more often in recited form. School children are required to memorize and recite famous poems by the dozens; actors earn extra money by giving poetry readings instead of doing commercials. Since a major medium for the transmittal of poetry is oral recitation, it is not surprising that more attention, creativity, and skill go into poetry recitation than we are used to. The Russian poet reciting his own poetry is indeed a force to be reckoned with. Joseph Brodsky immediately comes to mind. Thus, *Kulturpalast* is a unique opportunity not only to read some of the most advanced poetry of the last decade or so, but also, with the added dimension of an audiocassette, to hear it from the mouths of the poets themselves, and to compare the two.

The book contains selections from the poetry of Vsevolod Nekrasov, Andrej Monastyrskij, Dmitrij Prigov, and the Muxomory group (S. Gundlax, A. Kamenskij, S. and V. Mironenko, and K. Zvezdočotov) in the the Russian original with parallel German translations. The remaining materials, in German, include descriptions with photographs of some of the happenings (*akcii*) of the Collective Action Group (founded by N. Alekseev, G. Kizeval'ter, Monastyrskij, and N. Panitkov), a happening by N. Abalakova and A. Žigalov, some theoretical texts, thumbnail biographical sketches of the major contributors, a bibliography, and a fine introductory essay by the editors. The focus of the introduction, hence the title of the collection, is the image of the Palace of Culture (*Dvorec kul'tury*), which the editors see as the city of Moscow itself. The city, with its huge cultural and political buildings, plastered with monumental political icons and slogans, dwarfs the individual, forcing him either into a niche in the state structure or into a subservient position outside grand, closed doors, waiting meekly for an audience and a glimpse of the power and magnificence within—a view similar to that of Sinjavskij's "On Socialist Realism." The poets and groups included are seen as responding in their own fashion to this inescapable context of their existence.

Nekrasov is characterized as a minimalist, whose poems are created sometimes out of two or three words of the most ordinary, everyday speech, juxtaposed in such a way as to reveal hidden depths of meaning and irony. The individual constellations of words are typically surrounded on the page by the silence of a great deal of white space (though here, to economize, sometimes several poems are printed on a single page), and the reader is inclined to ponder them at length and in isolation. Some of the effects are purely visual and cannot be conveyed by recitation. It therefore comes as a surprise that the poet reads his poems in a rapid, calm patter which, on the other hand, brings out all the sound play. At the opposite pole, Monastyrskij reads similarly succinct poems from "Punktirnaja kompozicija (otryvki)" (1973) in a half-scream, half-song of intense emotiveness, almost painful to experience. Monastyrskij, a truly protean figure and a moving force in the Collective Action Group, is fortunately also represented on the cassette (but not in the book) by the sound poem "Priyatnoe čtenie" (1974) and an excerpt from "Sočinenie sem'desjat tret'ego goda," the former one of the most significant word-music compositions since Schwitters' *Ursonate*, and unique in Russian poetry. Here, of course, although a text does exist, it is precisely the author's performance that is essential.

Lev Rubenštejn is represented not in the book, but by a series of flash cards. Two works are represented on the cards, "Predromantičeskie predpoloženiya" and "Èto interesno" (both 1983), the former consisting of a series of dialogue lines (one per card; e.g.: "—Počti vse, kto nado, zdes'—i slava Bogu."), for which we are inclined to imagine a context and a continuation. The latter work is similarly designed, but consists, instead, of compound titles in the eighteenth-century style for novels we must posit (e.g., "POROČNYJ KRUG ili NADO BY POMOČ"). Rubenštejn reads these cards on the tape, but in this case I think the conceptualist essence of the works is better conveyed by the individual reader's holding, flipping, and reading the cards himself.

Prigov, characterized as "the poet of the Banal," would come across, if one considered only the texts printed in the book, as a comparatively traditional poet, who writes rhymed, metered lyrics. The focus of his attention, however, is mass culture, its language and thought patterns, which he presents with a combination of reportorial exactness and subtle illumination. The printed texts paired with authorial recitation are close to being equivalent, neither essential to the other. Yet there are other poems on the tape alone that are clearly different and require the author's performance for proper effect. Finally, the cassette and book present selections from "Zolotoj disk" (1982) by the Muxomory. Here the full effect can be gotten only from the tape, where wide-ranging parodistic poems in differing styles are read, sometimes with added reverberation, against the background of various types of recorded music. The humorous juxtapositions of music and text greatly intensify the satire. For example, to the sound of Russian church bells, the poet confesses with some enthusiasm to having killed a Pioneer. What sounds like a take-off on Voznesenskij is read first over the "Dies irae" from Verdi's *Requiem* and

then—with suitable amplification—over a march. If not even Voznesenskij is sacred to these "Toadstools," what is safe? The complete "Golden Disk" might well become a classic of cultural satire.

One minor complaint. The editors could have done a better job of coordinating the texts in the book with the readings on the tape. Even if not all the texts could be provided, at least the ones that are provided could have been presented in the same order as on the tape, which would have made it far easier for the listener.

Evidently some of the authors included here have protested the publication of their works in the West without their permission; one can easily understand why this publication would give them jitters. Nevertheless, *Kulturpalast* is a document of utmost importance for comprehending contemporary Soviet cultural life, and the idea of combining texts with tape recordings and other materials is excellent and brilliantly realized. The juxtaposition of the two media, particularly given the importance of the recitation of poetry in the Soviet context, reveals a full spectrum of new possibilities and critical-theoretical concerns for further exploration. The editors indicate that this volume is the first in a projected series of similar publications. By all means, it must continue.

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