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The Streets of Moscow

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Since the assimilation of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, and now perhaps reaching its pinnacle as Jeffrey Deitch prepares his programming at MoCA, street art has been a part of contemporary art around the world. But the institutionalization of the form still is a novelty for Russia, where there is a small underground graffiti scene, but only the best-known—like Misha Most or Valery Chtak—have had gallery exhibitions, and remained marginal. This, the [Moscow International Biennial for Young Art 2010](#) has decided to redress.

The Biennial event, now in its second edition, was organized to support international artists under the age of 35, and to demonstrate Russia's capability of joining a global contemporary art dialogue. It is hosted at Art Play, an old factory space converted into a versatile art space. This year, a new section dedicated to graffiti's many movements was added to the event.

A group of established French graffiti artists, who both show on and off the streets, were asked to produce pieces for the Biennial and aimed at a Russian audience; the theme was loosely termed "borders," a nod to the nation's ongoing political conflicts. This incorporation of street art into a national event is a first for the country, said Oxana Bondarenko, head of the curatorial team for graffiti, which was curiously named for her birthday, [The July 16](#), "Street art has never been shown in such a way as here, through installations, objects, all in an indoor space. We wanted to show the breadth of new techniques and themes... Here people still think graffiti is about spray-painting your name on a wall." National legislation of public defacement is extremely strict, she explained, "The state spends million of rubles hunting down graffiti artists, and painting out their works." Walking around the city, one frequently observes square patches of color where the local authorities have slapped a coat of paint over the offending graffiti, unwittingly recreating Suprematist iconography on a massive urban scale. These black squares are Kazimir Malevich's "voids" inverted—an artificially pure cover-up, ironically inscribed with a history of social protest.

"The art space gives me the opportunity of putting the piece in a identified artistic context, without giving the viewer the opportunity of questioning whether it is art or vandalism," says Paris-based, 32-year-old [Aghirre Schwarz \(a.k.a. ZEVS\)](#), who made headlines last year when he tagged a Chanel logo on an Armani store in Hong-Kong, which landed him in jail in Hong Kong for several weeks.

For the Russian Biennial, he rendered a recognizable symbol and creates a melting effect by applying spraypaint with a giant syringe, onto canvas. He calls the technique "liquidation." Here the symbol was a (5.50 meter height, 4 m width) painting of the hammer and sickle, yellow on a red background. During the opening, he held a live "liquidation" performance, mounting a ladder, clad in overalls and safety glasses and wielding custom-built syringes filled with yellow paint. The spectators seemed mildly amused; many seemed unsure of how to relate to the piece in the decidedly post-Communist atmosphere of luxury and glamour obsessed Moscow. As Aghirre Schwarz likes to say, "all that is solid melts into air," quoting Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*.

Using and distorting hegemonic Russian and Soviet symbols is a popular technique. Paris-based, 35-year-old [Christian Guémy, a.k.a. C215](#), painted the gigantic likeness of a Russian deacon Fyodor Konyukhov on the outside wall of the Art Play space, in his own stencil technique. "My aim isn't to cause provocation and say 'Fuck Putin': true revolution is to change the way you look at art, and provocation just leads to repression," Guémy says.

Whilst many of the street artists used the opportunity of the Biennial to experiment with other media, Guémy chose to stick to his classical stencil technique, because he finds it suitable both for galleries and for the street, he explained "I don't view my work as specifically 'street art', but rather a lucky interaction. The street artist is not me but the city, the passerby, the person who will take a photo of the work."

The notion of borders, and the binary opposition between interior and exterior is also at the core of Austrian and French artist couple [Jana Balluch and Jean-Sébastien Philippe](#). One of the factory's renovated glass walls reveals an outside train station and old council building in the background. Using stencils and photographs, they painted gigantic self portraits directly onto the transparent surface, standing in front of a set of buildings, identical to those one could see when looking from inside; the painting could also be seen on the outside. "This idea of the mirror, of returning and revealing the viewer's gaze is frequent in our work, because it encourages people to realize that a work of art is a dialogue with its context, whether it is a white cube or a abandoned factory space," says Philippe.

Previous works by the artists have included paintings of windows and frames on canvases; during the day of the opening, their *trompe-l'oeil* was enhanced by both artists wearing the same outfit as on the piece. "You can never simply transfer a piece meant for the street onto a gallery, but rather think about how to reevaluate this new context, and make people aware of it too," Philippe says. "The aim of the work was to humanize this cold, lifeless architecture that is characteristic of Russia, something that we hope will resonate with the local audience."

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