

Trying To Get In

A FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT AT THE MOSCOW BIENNALE

Wednesday February 28

In The Beginning

12:00 TSUM

"Dobry Dyen Druzya!"

I think it's Backstein speaking. This Press Conference is chaos. People everywhere. Can't see who's talking. Cameramen block the view.

TSUM department store hardly seems an apt venue for the Biennale. Backstein says artists are "in danger of being submerged in today's consumer society." What stronger emblem of the consumer society than TSUM?

Okay, it's central. I can walk here through the slush from my hotel at Smolenskaya in 30 minutes. But it's a horrible building. Built before World War One, by two Scotsmen. What remains? The first glimpse of the Biennale is an unlit, windowless, bare concrete hall: a plausible setting for a retrospective of American video art, maybe, but not this morning, with workmen everywhere. Nothing's ready. Red catalogues are available for 350 rubles but the Blue ones have all gone (or not arrived).

All Power to the Soviets

13:00 MARICEVIC GALLERY

I don't fancy the trip to the next press conference at the Federation Tower, wherever that is. I have a meeting at the Maricivec Gallery close to Tsereteli Cathedral.

At last year's Moscow World Art Fair, Maricivic were showing Soviet landscapes that weren't for sale. Strange approach. Ana Maricivic tells me these landscapes will be part of a Tretyakov exhibition in 2008.

Ana is a charismatic Serb who lives part-time in Belgium. Pregnant but stunning. Contemporary art in Russia today, she says, is just for the *tussovka* crowd. Derivative. Plagiarizes the West. She says the February 15 sale of Russian contemporary art at Sotheby's London was a put-up job to boost prices (I hear this again elsewhere). But she benefited too! Now she is about to sell 25 works on paper by Oscar Rabin that had been hanging in the gallery toilets.

Ana introduces me to Masha and Kyrill Belyaninov, who own Moscow Antiquities on Pushkinskaya. They are opening a new gallery, *Connaisseur*, for post-war art on Misnetsky. "There's a hole in the market for good abstract and expressionist works from the 1960s onwards" says Kyrill. In June they are showing a selection of non-conformist works (Belyutin, Zubirev, Grichenko) at the Kepco energy corporation in Seoul. "We will be the first Russian gallery to go into the Korean market" boasts Kyrill.

They promise to deliver a gallery catalogue to my hotel, but don't.

Ana's assistant Lisa kindly gives me a copy of V.P. Sisoyev's two-volume monography on Alexander Deyneka, one of the greatest Soviet artists, though his work seldom comes on the market.

Putin, says Ana, prefers Plastov.

Russian Christo

15:00 MUSEUM OF PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

I go to the Museum of Collections to see Filonov. As non-conformist as you can get. But little known in the West, despite his show at the Pompidou in 1979.

Always so much to see in Moscow! Filonov is not part of the Biennale and neither, I believe (but am not sure), is Alexander Konstantinov's *Kvartal Remix*, his latest attempt to cover buildings in coloured adhesive tape and plastic sheeting like a psychedelic Christo. I like this better than what he did outside the Tretyakov.

I was introduced to Konstantinov and his wife Natasha last summer by Sasha Ponamaryov and stayed at their datcha. Lovely! More Chekhov than Christo.

Russian Christ

17:00 MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

The Biennale uses all sorts of venues. At the Contemporary History Museum I meet Julia Gelman, sculptor Alexander Kosolapov, Lenin, Minnie Mouse, Jesus and Mr Evil.

It's my first encounter with the expensive bad wine beloved of Moscow art receptions. Why can't they give us good cheap vodka?

Oil Patriotism

18:30 MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

The *Petroliana* show upstairs on Petrovka is better. There is more urgency to the humour here. Russia's most lucrative industry is a symbol "of excessive consumerism and corporate greed" say the curators. Pity the show isn't sponsored by Gazprom. But Andrey Bartenev's light-and-sound sculpture *I Love You* downstairs is sponsored by Playboy.

Quirky exhibits include Christopher Draeger's oil slick and Bronislav Vinogradsky's calligraphic drawings, made by applying hot bitumen with chopsticks.

I hadn't seen the museum's permanent collection before. Small but select. Lots of Pirosmanni. Russia's Douanier Rousseau. Another artist we don't see in the West.

Mr Evil

20:30 RUMKA -

Dinner at Rumka. Why is it called *Rumka* when it serves so much Vodka?

Later, Mr Evil and Evgeni Dybsky appear. Evgeni was born in Romania and lives in Cologne. He is not the only Russian artist to live in Cologne! Why Cologne?

Mr Evil is from Nevsky Prospekt and called Ivan Ushkov. It is the only time I hear St Petersburg mentioned all week—except for talk of the Hermitage and Russian Museums giving more support to contemporary art than their Moscow counterparts.

The police confiscated Ushkov's computer after he showed at the House of Artists in February. His photographs are corrosive. Nazi cashiers in MacDonalds, a *Dom 3* soap-opera bloodbath... His photos seem as hostile to Putin's Russia as

Anna Politkovskaya's prose. It reminds me of breakfast today in the Golden Ring when, as our harpist strummed peacefully away, I read about *Kommersant* investigative journalist Ivan Safronov accidentally falling out of a 5th floor window.

Thursday March 1

Moving Through Moscow

09:20 GOLDEN RING HOTEL

- 09:20 Meet guide in hotel lobby and wait...
- 09:40 Leave hotel and take metro to Ploshad Revolutsy
- 10:00 Arrive at Ploshad Revolutsy
- 10:01 Guide gets lost
- 10:15 Reach Hotel Metropol to take Journalists' bus. Bus won't be ready till 10:30. Go for coffee in Metropol. Bump into Francis Briest, head of Artcurial, biggest French auction firm. He says Biennale reflects a "new renaissance for Russian painting" and westerners "feel closer to this painting than to Asian art. But it's still a bit conceptual. We have moved on."
- 10:30 Bus has moved on. Next one will "go soon"
- 11:00 Next bus goes
- 11:40 Bus reaches Trubnikovsky Pereulok

It is 2 hours 20 minutes since we meet in the Golden Ring. Trubnikovsky Pereulok is one kilometre from the Golden Ring. We could have walked there in 10 minutes.

The Exhibition Cannot Take Place

11:40 ERA FOUNDATION

We arrive at Era gallery and peruse black panels with white painted texts about exhibitions that have never happened: the work of Yuri Albert, also based in Cologne. One of his panels states that the 1996 Baltic Biennale "will never take place and cannot take place."

Sounds like Communist Paradise !

Woe From Wit

12:00 LITERARY MUSEUM

Just up the street is the Literature Museum. No one knows how to translate Griboyedov's title into English. Woes of Wit? Wit Works Woe?

I like Sergei Volkov's Botticelli blackboards and Boris Stuchebrov's *Galatea* made from 22,224 razor blades.

Presumably he has a beard.

Soup Time

13:30 MOSCOW MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Back on the bus I meet Klas Borjesson, Curator of the Kalmar Art Museum on Sweden's south Baltic coast. The Museum is reopening on May 26 in a brand new building with shows devoted to art from Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. I feel like warning him that they Cannot And Will Not Take Place.

Last year he organized an exhibition of neo-Soviet Realism, called *Double Dictatorship*, by Marina Naprushkina from Belarus.

Here I am in Moscow talking to a Swede about an artist from Belarus. Spasibo, Biennale!

We walk to the Modern Art Museum on Yermolayevsky Pereulok after the bus gets stuck in traffic beside Patriarch's Ponds. But no Margherita—only Blue Soup. Their three-part video installation, *Echelon*, is hypnotic. The cigarette-packet *Apollo Soyuz* by Alexey Kallima & Inna Boguslavskaya sends a smoke signal, but their Marlborough-packet sculptures have greater wit.

Lunch Time

15:00 RU'ARTS

The Biennale offers a schizophrenic mix of crumbling factories, unfinished buildings and white-walled galleries gleaming with sophisticated lighting and hi-tec minimalism.

But the Single-Oyster Lunch at the RuArts gallery is minimalism gone beserk.

Tower of Babel

20:30 FEDERATION TOWER

The Biennale's second main venue is even more improbable than TSUM: the 19th-21st floors of the Federation Tower, on a giant building site to the west of the city centre, ambitiously dubbed Moskva City.

When finished this will boast the world's highest glass elevators, soaring skywards at 18 meters per second. Today, however, we must take a workman's metal cage on the outside of the building. It rattles upwards at about 1 meter per minute. Unlike yesterday's lucky journalists, we are not given workmen's helmets.

"Tough, strong security checks" growled Comrade Backstein. "Children barred!"

Up on the 21st Floor, amidst an ocean of vodka and pounding rock music, eight international curators have cooked up a smorgasbord of pictures, sculptures, videos and installations with no apparent theme beyond "irony, defiance and poetry." Some of the signs, fittings and bare wiring seems as artistic as the art. Works making best use of the surrealist setting include sardonic window cartoons by Romania's Don Perjovschi, and the neon-tubed *AURORA* by Brazil's Carmella Gross, flickering through the Moscow night in ghostly homage to 1917.

The Mirax Group are building two towers. One, at 354 meters (448 if you add a Stalinist spire), will be Europe's Tallest Building. 207,000 square meters of office space!

That's a lot of secretaries.

When will it be finished? I hear three years, maybe five. I hear also that Stella Kay is moving in with her Foundation.

Poor Stella! First she has to shut her gallery, then she risks being marooned at the top of a tower with no lift, like Rapunzel, obliged to grow her jet-black hair long enough for a handsome prince (Putin? Tsereteli?) to climb up and rescue her.

Friday March 2

Building Moscow

11:30 VKHUTEMAS

This morning we boycott the bus and reach Vkhutemas by Metro and a slushy walk up Rozhdyestvenka. It is hard to find the entrance. I go into the florid Architectural Institute by mistake, choc full of budding architects, one of Moscow's most lucrative careers these days.

The magnificent, huge-windowed Vkhutemas gallery is half-hidden behind a metal garage. In 1913 this was the first concrete building in Moscow. The show inside, *Building New Moscow*, features designs by 15 architects, all in the form of inventive sculptures. I like ArtBlya's wiggly metal; Savinkin & Kuzmin's *Sweetmosphere*; Vladimir Plotkin's *Multiplicity*, with its 81 polystyrene cells; and Laurids Ortner's *Quadricolor* skyscraper.

Their connexion to the Biennale (or I fear to future buildings) is doubtful. But they are part of the overall scene. I like the lateral thinking behind the Biennale.

I know no city with so much interesting and varied architecture as Moscow. Creativity is alive and well. But does Luzhkov know it?

Private Enterprise

13:00 EKATERINA FOUNDATION

Plaques of icy snow cascade from the roofs on to dangerous pavements as we stride to the Ekaterina Foundation. Should we walk out in the road or stay up against the walls?

We have the wrong address. We got to the wrong place twice. The right address, near Lubyanka, is smart. The welcome is professional. The buffet is excellent. But the marble-walled rooms are soulless. And I don't understand what's going on. This looks like a private collection housed in a private museum. Why is it called a "foundation"?

As Vladimir and Ekaterina Semenikhin are not here, I cannot ask them. I read somewhere that their foundation is a "non-commercial charity supported by voluntary donations from individuals." Why do they need charity? Why do they leave Igor Markin the kudos of founding Russia's first private art museum since the Revolution?

The display starts with Stepanova and Popova and throws up a startling 1930s work by Adlivankin. But it's misleading to term it *1916-2006*. The title

Movement Evolution Art is fatuous. We meet the curator Alexandra Kharitonova. She is keen to help but very young.

I read also that Vladimir and Ekaterina began collecting Western art (notably Wesselmann, Rosenquist and Calder) in 2004.

When will rich Westerners start buying Russian art?

Obvious Humour

16:00 CENTRAL HOUSE OF ARTISTS

Humour at the Guelman show is blacker than the Moscow sky. *Kunst Macht Frei* in neon, near Stalin portrayed as an MGM hero, is a wry juxtaposition, though neither is great art. The close-up of poisoned Alexander Litvinenko is just bad taste.

As I am leaving I bump into Igor Kormyshev. I first met him on the Art Agency Colony stand at the 2006 Moscow World Art Fair, when he tried to strangle me for taking a catalogue. Now we're friends. I like his stylish two-level gallery in Art Play. He sells good Soviet art and his own art is good too. But mixing the two... I'm not so sure.

He wants to take part in western fairs. But how?

As dealer or artist?

Blocked at the Border

17:00 NEW TRETYAKOV

Next door, in New Tretyakov, the aim is to compare *Sots Art* with its Chinese equivalent. But that's impossible. The Chinese art has been blocked at the border.

Still, it's good to learn more about Sots. The humour is facile but places today's Russian scene in context.

More lateral thinking from the Biennale.

Wine Time

20:00 VINZAVOD

After TSUM and the Federation Tower, time for the Biennale's third major venue: Vinzavod. Russia's "New Chelsea." Will we meet Comrade Abramovich?

It is pouring with rain and free Armenian cognac, but there is a crowd big enough to fill Stamford Bridge.

A slippery slope lined by flaming torches leads to Oleg Kulik's sprawling *Veryu* show, an Ali Baba's cave of contemporary art. As I leave I meet Sasha Ponomaryov, just arriving with the boss of Paris's Festival d'Automne. "Come!" orders Sasha.

You don't disobey Sasha unless you are with one of the most beautiful women in Moscow.

We go to see *We Are Your Future*, featuring works by 15 Latin American artists and 20 from China (not held up at customs). Here's a little fact: according to Artprice, 25 of the 100 most lucrative contemporary artists at auction are Chinese. None are Russian.

We also see work by artists from Joseph Backstein's Institute of Contemporary Art, led by Anna Orekhova with a sculpture made from black tights. Anna is blonde and demure. I cannot imagine her wearing black tights, except, perhaps, at the nearby *Gasholder* night-club.

Last May I went to the Arma gasworks and met bald bold Mr Yakut in his gasholder showroom. But I did not get to the sexy *Gasholder* night-club.

I do not get there tonight either. I am hungry and get a hot-dog in Kursky Vokzal.

Saturday March 3

Just Like Lenin

10:00 LENIN MUSEUM

Why is one of central Moscow's most imposing buildings always shut? I have never been inside the ex-Lenin Museum. This morning is my chance! But I can't get in. The door won't open. I can see visitors inside and a janitor gesturing. So

I walk around looking for another door. There isn't one. I come back and find that if you give the door a good kick it behaves normally.

Inside, just the foyer is in use. I like Julia Bochkova's psychedelic self-portraits made by computer-treating pictures taken with a digital camera. You can see how she does it on the monitors. It's clever and fun.

Just like Lenin!

Lenin & Kerensky

10:45 HISTORY MUSEUM

Next door is the History Museum and an exhibition about 1917. No Aurora, just Kerensky and Lenin.

Lenin died in 1924 and is now buried 100 metres away, and everyone comes to gawp at him. Kerensky died in 1970 and is buried in New York, and everyone has forgotten him. Who was cleverer?

Pierre & Gilles

11:30 MANEGE

The Manege is more beautiful when you can admire its empty volumes than during the Moscow World Art Fair, when it is full of sophisticated clutter. Downstairs, instead of jewellers, there is a retrospective devoted to French photographic couple Pierre & Gilles. Their narcissism reminds me of Gilbert & George and their kitchiness of Vinogradov & Dubosarsky.

Shooting Star

13:30 ARTERIUM

I prefer Mravinsky & Shostakovich. After a buying spree at Dom Muziky, I fail to find the entrance to Arterium. Downstairs, past Philip Starck's Moscovite gun-lamps, is Yuri Shabelnikov's *Esoteric Football*, shown by Paris gallery Orel. Still no Abramovich and that's just as well because, over the week's best cocktails, Ilona Orel admits she supports Rotor Volgograd.

Video Temple

15:00 M'ARS

Other western journalists have gone home now, so I take the VIP bus to Mars. It's in another street the bus can't get into. There is plenty of video here, Constantine Khudyakov under the roof with his fresco-size portrayals of Moscow worksites, and Tsereteli.

Not Zurab: Vasily. But a Tsereteli nevertheless.

Video Factory

16:00 FABRIKA

The bus gets lost in the suburbs trying to find Fabrika which, I learn later, is a former paper factory that hosts the Pusto Video Art Festival each August. Inside they are offering vodka and Pam Skelton's *Burning Poems*, inspired by Anna Akhmatova. Like me, Skelton comes from Yorkshire in the north of England. She is on the spot and happy to talk. She chose Akhmatova as the "conscience of her generation."

Who's ours?

Sailing Through Moscow

19:00 MOSCOVA RIVER

I last saw Sasha Ponomaryov's psychedelic submarine in a fountain outside the Louvre. Now it's in the Moscova and new owner Julia Abbasova is celebrating in a bigger boat alongside.

It's a great party and full of great artists like Francisco Infante, Valody Narotkin, Tanya Badanina and Eric Bulatov. Paris dealer Luc Bellier is on board too. "Selling is complicated in Moscow, but it's easy to buy" says Bellier. He praises the Biennale's "variety and dynamism" and enjoys the "vibrant artistic scene... with new venues, galleries on the move, and artists gaining international reputations."

We sail down the Moscova but turn round before Murmansk.

Afterwards I join Sasha and Sasha Konstantinov for dinner at the flat of Francisco Infante. He is a charming man, and it is delightful company.

The Moscow artistic community is tight-knit. Many leading artists are open and accessible. Another lesson from the Biennale.

Sunday March 4

On The Wall

13:30 ARCHITECTURE MUSEUM

Dostoyevsky looks forlorn in the snow outside Lenin Library. Strange that Russian, such a concise language, has to resort to *Library In The Name Of V.I. Lenin* to say Lenin Library.

The Architecture Museum is another place where to get in you need a degree in orienteering. Doors all round the courtyard but no signs. Behind one door lurks a revolving limousine covered in tar and feathers. Behind another, and up the stairs, lurk projected slides by Canadian photographer Jeff Wall. Just three to a room.

Who said the Biennale lacked space ?

Lost Eden

14:30 ULITSA VOLKHONKA

I head off to 6 Ulitsa Volkhonka to find the Contemporary City foundation and Vadim Zakharov's *Caramel in the Botanical Gardens*. I can't find it. There is scaffolding everywhere and no Biennale sign. I walk up and down Ulitsa Volkhonka in vain. I peer around corners and explore a building site. I finally find 6 Ulitsa Volkhonka. There is still no sign and there is a big heavy intimidating door and I do not fancy going through it and being confronted with a big heavy intimidating caretaker.

I'm not sure even Sherlock Holmes would unravel the mysteries of the Biennale.

Home Show

16:30 RED SQUARE

As an alternative to Zakharov's Botanical Gardens, I decide to see the Alexander Gardens outside the Kremlin. First I need to cross Borovitskaya Ploschad. But it is impossible to cross Borovitskaya Ploschad. There is no

crossing. There is no subway. I go halfway across Bolshoy Kamenny Most. I should not be doing this. Especially with a soldier on the prowl at the other side, probably with a gun.

I get halfway across. The road is as wide as an airport runway. I wait for a gap in the traffic coming from Yakimanka. I wait one minute. Two. There is no gap. I retreat.

I go up Ulitsa Znamenka and cross to Mokhovaya and finally find a passageway near the Manege through to Alexander Gardens. I have walked 800 metres instead of 100.

The soldiers by the eternal flame look even colder than me. Up on Red Square, sheltering from the blizzard, the eternal Lenin is closed. I go to look for *Gostiny Dvor*. There is a show of home-fittings on, and you have to pay to get in. Perhaps that is why there is no one inside. Or perhaps it is because the show is excruciatingly boring. I just wanted to see *Gostiny Dvor*. I have never seen such a huge single-roofed space. Why didn't they use it for the Biennale, instead of making people queue 40 minutes in a blizzard to go halfway up a half-finished tower?

Cypriot Chamber Music

22:00 COFFEE MANIA

Moscow is as huge as London but unlike London it has a centre. For tourists the centre is Red Square but for culture-vultures it is *Coffee Mania* outside the Conservatoire. Tonight I meet there with DEI's delightful Roxolana to talk about interviewing Tsereteli. Her smile and mind are 22,224 razor-sharp. We bump into Garo Keheyian from the Pharos Trust who organizes chamber music events in Cyprus. You meet all kinds of people during the Biennale.

But where is the centre of the Biennale? TSUM?

There is supposed to be a Biennale press office in TSUM, but I have never found it.

Monday March 5

Constructivist Moscow

09:00 CHISTIYE PRUDY

A lady from Vkhutemas had promised to show me some of constructivist Moscow, but when I call her she is busy. A few hours later Anna calls and we arrange to meet at 9 at Chisty Priudi.

Anna Gaynutdinova writes for *Luchshiy Interiory* and once cycled to Odessa. We go to Le Corbusier's Centrosoyuz building on Myasnitskaya; then take the Metro to Sokolniki and see Melnikov's Burevstnik Club (now transformed into a garish fitness centre) and Rusakov Club, where the caretaker wants a bribe to let us in; then back to Belaruskaya, and Golosov's Zuyev Club, where the caretaker lets us up the stairs.

All great Avant-Garde buildings, corresponding to the great Avant-Garde period of Russian art.

What is the correlation between art and architecture in Russia today?

No One Home

12:00 CAFE PUSHKIN

I have to leave Anna because I have a meeting with Olga Sviblova at Cafe Pushkin to discuss her House of Photography and the Biennale.

I wait an hour for Comrade Sviblova but she does not appear.

"She's always late" explains Comrade Ponomaryov, when I mention this to him. "Two hours, usually."

The Godfather

15:00 ACADEMY OF ART

After talking to Roxolana I have 34 questions for Zurab Tsereteli, and I rush along Prechistenka to be early for our 3pm meeting. It is 4:15 before he has time to talk.

He arrives with his minders. Shakes hands mechanically. Heads up the stairs with a little skip. His office has neo-Gothic panelling and faux Louis XV furniture. On his desk is a red quill, a gold eagle and a red apple.

Three huge photographs of Zurab with Putin lean casually against the wall. Elsewhere I have seen Putin in a variety of parodied poses, from Batman to a Medici Prince. Here he looks serious. He is proud to pose with Zurab.

Tsereteli holds court. We wait for him at a large round table in the middle of the room. He is wearing a gold ring with a giant black cameo, braces, and a metal arm-band around his upper sleeve like an old-time newspaper boss. People are ushered in and confess to him in low voices. Tsereteli doodles and plays with his mobile phone, occasionally replying in a low drone, though when he wants he has a deep voice that carries. It is 55 minutes before he smiles.

Yuri Abramochky opens his lap-top and shows us his photos of Soviet leaders.

Suddenly Zurab ambles over and says he wants avant-garde, classical and pop art mixed up in a single museum, and he wants to open branches of this museum in St Petersburg, Tbilisi, Paris and New York.

"Talented Russians go abroad" he admits. "We lack good propaganda for art, and need to unite different trends."

I cannot remember if he says all this in reply to one of my 34 questions. I soon realize that questions and answers are irrelevant to Zurabian dialectic.

He is just back from a sculpture in Osaka. He starts his day with painting. He likes the Impressionists. He uses bright colours to compensate for Moscow's lack of sun. He was backed by Saryan, opposed by Serov.

What did he think of the Soviet system?

For once he almost replies. "Georgian artists are cynical. I had no time to think."

A servant brings up a huge book and Zurab starts doodling with a silver ink-pen with a gold nib. His mobile phone rings endlessly.

What's it like being a Georgian in Moscow right now ?

"Russia and Georgia are like an old couple. We have our ups and downs."

It's almost a reply. He is thawing—perhaps because he sees me thumbing a copy of his 416-page biography.

"In Soviet times we were not used to doing things ourselves" he recalls. "The psychology was to ask for help."

Sounds like modern France.

"These days political support in Russia means freedom, not money!" he adds. "It is very important to do things yourself! Galleries need to be supported!"

Suddenly the interview is over. Zurab invites me to come and eat. I would love to, but I have a date at the Conservatoire and decline.

Tuesday March 6

The New Tretyakov?

11:00 ULITSA 1905

Igor Markin has made a fortune selling PVC windows. He sends a car to meet me at Ulitsa 1905 metro and take me to his smart new office block, where much of his art collection—700 works acquired over the last 13 years from auction, galleries, fairs and artists—currently hangs. "I don't want to squint at them in narrow corridors any more" he moans. "And if I put them in storage, I'll forget about them!"

So he is opening Moscow's first private art museum since Shchukin, 100 years ago.

Igor is 39 with long, lank hair. He is a Moscow Mover Of Today: a businessman with an eye for aesthetics and an urge to learn. He prowls all the main international art fairs ("Basel is best") and claims that love of art is his motivation. But he also admits that his collection is "not a bad investment—increasing in value by 30 per cent a year, for sure." He remembers nostalgically that, only five years ago, he was "practically alone and could spend a long time in the galleries. Now I need to decide and pay immediately!"

Once his museum is up and running he will start buying international art. He is not enamoured of the Biennale. "I'm a patriot but I don't like it. I don't like buildings under construction or queueing up in dirty conditions." He would prefer it to have a single major venue. He doesn't like traffic jams.

He doesn't like the Metro, either.

Perestroika?

11:45 MARKIN'S OFFICES

Markin has commissioned works for his museum-opening from Dmitri Gultov, Valery Koshlyakov and Dmitry Prigov, who joins us.

Prigov began as an underground artist in the late 1950s, and spent one month in an asylum as recently as 1988. "Everybody thought the system would last for ever" he recalls. Yet he insists that literature is more dangerous than art, and feels the State is "no longer ideological, but manipulative." Censorship these days is applied less to art than to the political media.

He tells me that the State Centre for Contemporary Art has branches in Kaliningrad, Nizhny Novogorod, Ekaterinburg and Samara. The lively scene in Rostov-on-Don has disintegrated. Odessa, once Russia's third city, is now in Ukraine.

It's good to hear about art outside Moscow. And what else is there to do in Kaliningrad?

Even though the Baltic Biennale cannot and will not take place.

New Jerusalem

14:00 RIGA STATION

I have been in Moscow for one hectic, slushy week and need to escape. Trips to Rostov Veliky and Yaroslavl were called off. A possible trip to Vladimir was replaced by an excursion to Kusskovo, then it turned out that Kusskovo is closed on Tuesdays. So I decide to go to New Jerusalem.

I take the metro to Rizhsky Vokzal and try to find the train station. No signs! I finally find the station. But there are no trains to Iskra. They leave from a shack 100 metres away.

New Jerusalem has the biggest dome I have ever seen. It was blown up by the Nazis but has been rebuilt. Slowly, stylishly. Never underestimate the Russians!

I stop a car to get back to Iskra station and say "vokzal" to the driver, who laughs.

"Which vokzal? Kazansky? Kursky? Kievskvy?"

My Russian needs improving.

Wednesday March 7

The Commissar

11:30 COFFEE SHOP NEXT TO CAFE PUSHKIN

Russia, says Joseph Backstein, has always had a unique position: part of Europe, but still marginal. "Russia is a difficult country. You never know what's going on. It's a country of hidden meanings. It's impossible to do anything... but you can do anything you want!!"

Backstein launched the Biennale in winter to "make Moscow unique. It's quite tough, but ultimately exciting!" He admits that the first Biennale, staged in temperatures of -20, was "maybe a little cold." But his main worry this year was that work on the show at the Federation Tower was only possible to temperatures of -14, and had to be halted for a few days in mid-February when the thermometer dropped to -16.

The reasons for his choice of venues were both symbolic and practical. The first Biennale, subtitled *The Dialectics of Hope*, was based at the Lenin Museum to say *Goodbye To The Past*. Using the Federation Tower says *Hello To The Future*.

He admits the special projects are uneven but says they give the bigger picture. The huge scope of the 2007 Biennale "is exciting, and reflects the glamour, status and importance of contemporary art."

The Biennale was the subject of a 10-year debate, prompted by "me and a few curators like Leonid Bazhanov, and art critics like Victor Misiano." He says the Biennale is an important part of cultural politics, and is proud of the catalogue preface from Putin's Deputy Chief of Staff Vladislav Surkov, praising "free development of the arts, supported at State level." He bemoans the poor relationship between the Culture Ministry and Mayor Lyzhkov, but says Moscow gave the Biennale free space.

He is also ambivalent about Tsereteli, but calls him "a very smart guy and very flexible." Tsereteli gave him a medal after the 1st Biennale.

Backstein is carrying a large bunch of flowers. It's Ladies' Day.

The Photographer

12:30 CAFE PUSHKIN

I head next door with no flowers to Cafe Pushkin to talk about Moscow photography. Not to that unreliable diva Olga Shiblova, but to reliable fashion photographer Julia Sarapova, who works for *Collezione*, *Glamour* and *Vogue*, and is prettier.

Julia is one of ten photographers planning to open a joint gallery in central Moscow this summer called *Galerie 33*, selling prints produced in runs of 33, priced from €200 to €600 according to size. "We have products for people who don't understand contemporary art, but want a nice picture on the wall" she explains.

Perhaps she means me.

Round And Round

13:30 ZURAB GALLERY

I head down Tverskoy Boulevard, past a poster advertising a concert by Demis Roussos, who must have been a star for as long as Zurab Tsereteli.

I try to go into the spanking new Zurab Gallery, but go in the wrong door. The gallery was opened February 7, by Andrey Bartenev in a sequined lizard suit, and Zurab Gallery in a black crocodile-leather jacket (borrowed, perhaps, from Demis Roussos). It's called the *Zurab Gallery*, says grandson Vasily, because "the name Zurab is somehow on the tip of everyone's tongue." I am given a bottle of Tovarisch vodka to help me swallow this.

Luca Pancrazzi's 1:1 show has coloured windbags in Venini glass strewn around the floor and, upstairs, *Maseratirundum 2007*, a 15-minute film showing a black limousine covered in silicon and broken glass roaring around Moscow.

Round and round Moscow, in Zurab's limousine, with a bottle of vodka. It's time to go.

—Simon Hewitt

