

A Star Called Monroe

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Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe was an idiosyncratic Russian artist whose rise to stardom came in the wake of perestroika, as he pushed the boundaries of identity, gender and celebrity status through his reinventions of the world's iconic stars. Researchers Dr. Olesya Turkina and Dr. Victor Mazin¹ survey his short career, as Kiasma mounts his first solo show in Finland

A star

The star of Vladislav Yurievich Mamyshev-Monroe ascended at the beginning of perestroika. In fact, perestroika started not in politics but in art. In 1982, Timur Novikov founded the *Novye khudozhniki* (New Artists) group; in 1984, Sergey Kuryokhin organised the *Popular Mechanics* orchestra; and only then, in 1985, the newly elected relatively young General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev began talking about the need for perestroika. Vladislav Mamyshev saw in Gorbachev the swapping of the male archetype for female, militarist policy for pacifist. The artist marked his official portrait of the General Secretary with a *bindi* – third eye and a sign of truth in Hinduism, which is also a mark of married women. This collage is the first artwork by Mamyshev to have been widely recognised. A portrait of Gorbachev by Vladislav Mamyshev, of course, was bound for success in the mass media, and set the artist up for stardom. It was reprinted by a number of leading Western magazines, in particular, by the German magazine *Stern* (Star).

Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe's star shone internationally, and his magical helper – in the sense in which the word is used by Russian fairy-tale expert Vladimir Yakovlevitch Propp – was the star of perestroika, Mikhail Gorbachev. A reproduction of Gorbachev's portrait as a woman hung above the desk of the Director of Radio Liberty in Munich. In a text he wrote for *Kabinet* magazine, the artist said that thanks to this transformation of the symbol and initiator of perestroika, 'Democratisation, perestroika, glasnost, all this continued the work of the positive female archetype and shifted completely in the direction of the positive rebirth of the planet'. Vladislav caught the signals of social transformation. The last General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party attempted a historical change by directing the whole country from a destructive masculine mode to a creative feminine one. We can say that with the magic of his art, Mamyshev-Monroe contributed to perestroika.

Perestroika is essentially a radical transformation of the whole human symbolic environment. Perestroika opened the Stargate. The 1994 sci-fi movie *Stargate*, directed by Roland Emmerich, showed how using an interstellar device, one could be instantly transported to an unknown planet outside our galaxy, where living conditions were similar to those on

¹ About Olesya Turkina and Victor Mazin, see <http://www.mg-lij.si/en/events/2036/a-short-history-of-necrorealism/>.

Earth, and whose inhabitants resembled the ancient Egyptians. Similarly, perestroika became a gate in time and space. Someone returned to another planet, in the time of pagan Russia; someone turned to the mystical East; someone flew back to the Russian Empire...

In 1988, at the moment when the *Stargate* opened thanks to perestroika, Vladislav Monroe returned to Leningrad. He came down to the ground of his native city from the sky of Baikonur, the main Soviet cosmodrome; the soldier Mamyshev was invalided out of the army because of his successful transformation into Marilyn Monroe, which was considered a serious mental deviation. After this incident, his career as a manager of a military entertainment club in the main army headquarters of the Soviet cosmodrome was over.

Through a *Stargate*, Vladislav returned to a different time and immediately became active in artistic circles, which he considered to be the most progressive and prepared audience for the perception of Monroe's signal. After returning from the army to his native city, he immediately found himself among artists, playing ukulele in Sergei Kuryokhin's cult *Popular Mehanika* orchestra, just as Marilyn Monroe did in his favourite film *Some Like it Hot*. This comedy by Billy Wilder was released in the Soviet Union in the spring of 1985, and Vladik Mamyshev, then 16 years old, went to the cinema every day to watch it. The movie had 'it all': Marilyn Monroe, Joe and Jerry disguised as Josephine and Daphne, and love, that makes you forget who you are, a guy or a girl, because after all, *nobody's perfect*.

In the summer of 1989, Vladislav Mamyshev made his first performance in the exhibition *Woman in Art*. He became an artist. Accompanied by the vocal female ensemble *Kolibri*, and disguised as Marilyn Monroe, Vladik read a text on abortions from a Soviet medical handbook. This performance brought Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe fame, especially media fame. But this fame was accompanied by extremely absurd and tragi-comic circumstances. The most popular TV news programme in Leningrad, *600 Seconds*, filmed Vladislav's performance. The same day it was aired on TV, seasoned by a commentary that a hermaphrodite artist had made a performance in the exhibition *Woman in Art*, and there was no place for such creatures in our society. A manhunt for Vladislav began, having recognised the artist, passers-by chased him down the street, screaming 'kill the hermaphrodite'. Against his will, he became a media star. But these stars, fortunately, quickly fade. From time to time, after another TV report on the performance, media glory caught up with the artist again, but he himself said many times that he didn't want to be just a media star.

In 1991, Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe travelled abroad for the first time to Helsinki. He took part in a media performance titled *Telescoping as a Method of Collective Reflexology* in Suomenlinna. The performance was simultaneously part of the exhibition *Chill and Beauty* in MUU Ry's space, and of the international performance festival *Black Market*. On stage, there were four monitors with pre-recorded reports, read by the authors in different languages in real time. Mamyshev-Monroe played the role of a 'variable of unconsciousness': opening his mouth, he represented the main speaker, gesturing with his hands. *Telescoping* explored how an individual body represented a collective body, and what kind of role television played in the mechanics of talking heads with opening mouths. The next day, the Soviet Union recognised the independence of Estonia, and Finnish television invited the artist to do a live performance. Mamyshev-Monroe came to the TV studio dressed as Marilyn Monroe, and after an official greeting, he sang 'Happy birthday, Estonia!'

It is fundamentally important that Mamyshev-Monroe's star did not rise on stage, nor on TV, and not because he impersonated a wide variety of recognisable characters, but in the field of contemporary art. He became a conceptual artist who worked with drawings, paintings, performance, film, video... Mamyshev-Monroe became the star of *Pirate TV* (filmed by Yuris Lesnik, produced by Timur Novikov). The *Pirate TV* production started in an artists' squat in Fontanka 145; this was where the *Boy Club* and artists' studios were located; there Mamyshev-Monroe made his first large paintings; he starred in the short 16mm film by Andrius Venclova, *Death of Monroe (John and Marilyn)*. *Pirate TV* covered alternative news on cultural life in Leningrad. An ever-present anchorman, Mamyshev-Monroe appeared at the openings of the latest art exhibitions and in private parties, at receptions in consulates and in conferences. On 20 August 1991, *Pirate TV* made a piece titled *The GKChP (The State Committee on the State of Emergency) Hydra*, dedicated to the victory over reactionary political forces. The struggle was in full swing. The previous day a state of emergency had



Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe performing in Helsinki in 1991

Photo Sakari Viika

been introduced in Leningrad and one of the imposed regulations was a restriction on the use of video and audio equipment. On 20 August, a protest rally in the Palace Square attracted 300,000 citizens, and at that very moment nearby, in an artists' squat on Moika 22, where the artists and *Pirate TV* had moved, a programme about the victory over the 'GKChP Hydra' was being shot. Mamyshev-Monroe himself played the Hydra of the counter-revolution, perishing from the punching blows of democratic forces, represented by the artists Timur Novikov and Georgy Guryanov.

Mamyshev-Monroe always carefully analysed and described everything that happened to him, from his childhood diaries to articles in the *Kabinet* magazine, where he worked as part of the editorial team. After all, his star rose in a transitional period. He became an artist at the moment when the former totalitarian Soviet ideology was being dismantled, and new capitalist ideology gradually formed; but he never forgot his childhood and his 'party' roots.

A star is born

Vladislav Mamyshev's mother was a responsible party official. A game, which could have been called 'identify the party leaders', invented by the mother for her son, is evidence of the rigour and radical ideological bent of upbringing in the family. The task was the following: having received from mom a set of portraits of members of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and a range of names, Vladislav proceeded to match the pictures to the names. Vladislav was preparing himself to take his place in the mausoleum next to the

General Secretary, when his time came. Instead, he became an artist and created a series of portraits titled *Members of the Politburo*, turning them all into women, and putting a sadomasochistic mask on the face of one of them.

The child's – and his mother's – love for the higher echelons of power reached its limit at some point: Vladik Mamyshev fell in love with Hitler. They found out about it at school, then in the KGB, so the future artist would have surely been expelled, were it not for his mother's connections in party circles. As a result of this incident, Mamyshev turned away from the party. Love was gone. However, he repeatedly turned to the figure of Hitler as an image of radical evil, opposed to Marilyn Monroe's image of absolute love.

Marilyn Monroe's star rose during a geography lesson at school, when a teacher was discussing the tragedy of American lifestyle, and as an example, she recounted how everyone's beloved movie star Marilyn Monroe committed suicide out of despair. The tale of the actress's fate deeply moved Vladik; especially when he was shown a photo of her by the teacher. He had recognised his ideal. He had found himself. He had found his identity in the shining of a distant star.

Young Mamyshev began to collect Marilyn Monroe's photos obsessively, as well as newspaper and magazine clippings about her, carefully redrawing her image and studying her biography to the last detail. Vladislav Mamyshev was preparing himself for the coming reincarnation in a few years, for becoming special: the artist-transmitter of the star signal of Marilyn Monroe.

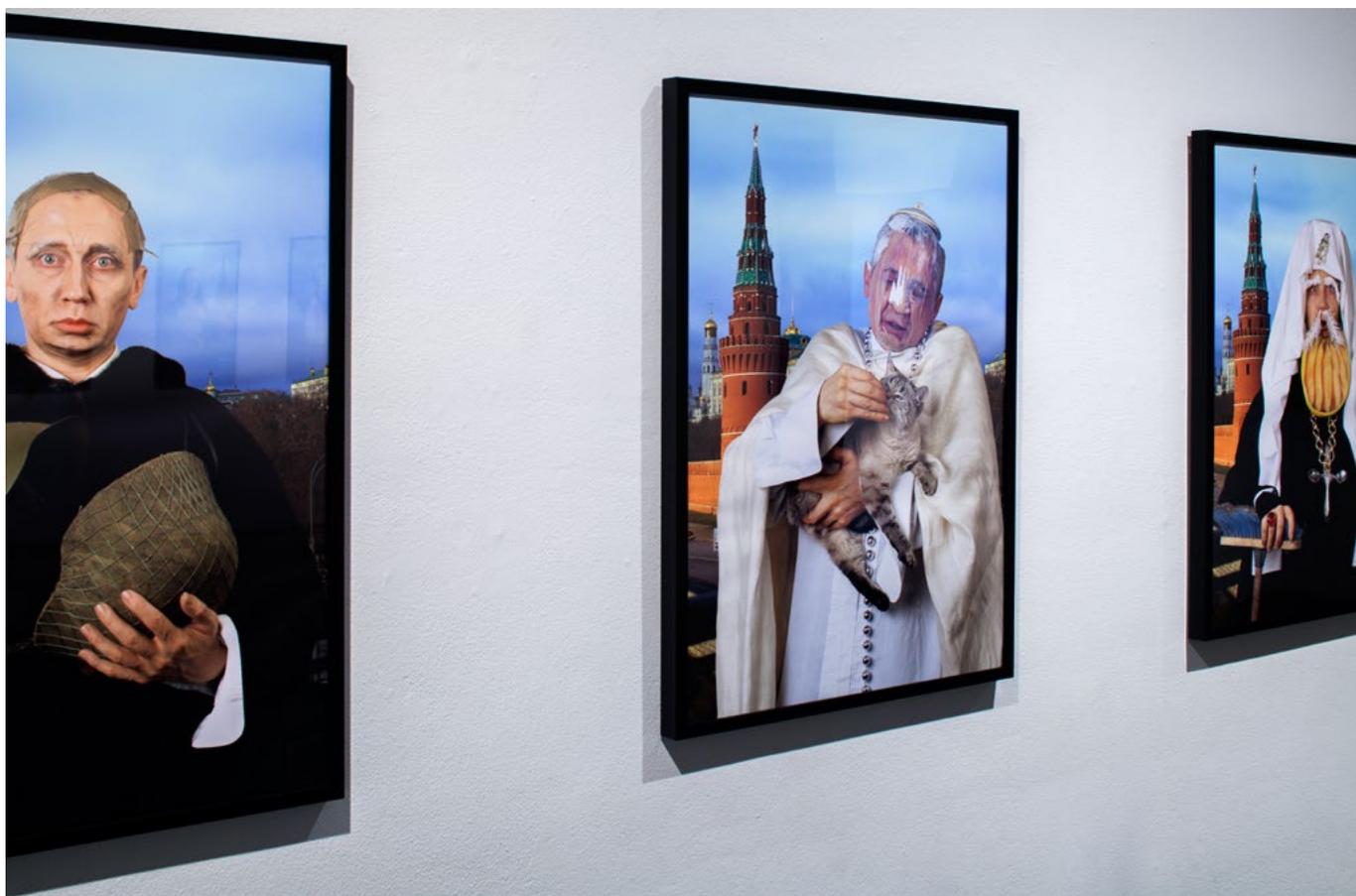
His obsession got our hero into further trouble. He was caught cutting out Marilyn Monroe's portraits from books and magazines in libraries. The major Leningrad youth newspaper *Smena* ('Rising Generation') published an article on 5 November, 1986, about a young man called Vladislav Mamyshev, who had been engaged in activities causing damage to public property.

Monroe stardust

It would have been a challenge to list all of the famous people Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe impersonated during his short but dazzlingly colourful life (he died in 2013). He managed to create a real *Stardust*: Brigitte Bardot and Greta Garbo, Michael Jackson and Elton John, Kim Il Sung and Fyodor Dostoevsky, Elizabeth Taylor and Vladimir Mayakovsky, Andy Warhol and Osama bin Laden, Leo Tolstoy and Vera Kholodnaya, Alla Pugacheva and Grigory Rasputin, Marlene Dietrich and Amy Winehouse ... *Russian Stardust – International Stardust but with the Russian accent*.

In 1995, Mamyshev-Monroe made a series of portraits, *The Life of the Remarkable Monroe*, for an exhibition in the Yakut Gallery in Moscow. Some of the portraits were on show in the gallery, and some were displayed on a building fence in Bolshaya Yakimanka Street. In the series Mamyshev-Monroe was transformed into 12 star personas: Buddha, Dracula, Catherine II, Joan of Arc, Peter I, Sherlock Holmes, Hitler, Faust, Napoleon, Vladimir Ilich Lenin, Jesus Christ, and of course Marilyn Monroe. All 12 portraits represented Mamyshev-Monroe himself, an infinite monroe-ness of his art. The image of Monroe shone through every hero. These portraits made him into a media star again. Hitler's portrait remained for three days on the fence, until the Moscow mayor Yuri Mikhailovitch Luzhkov saw it and ordered its immediate removal. After the May Day demonstration in 1996, when the Communists filled Yakimanka Street, the British newspaper *The Independent* published an image of the demonstration on its front page with huge portraits by Mamyshev-Monroe in the background. The caption read: 'Where yesterday there were portraits of members of the Politburo, today there are portraits of Marilyn Monroe.' Yet *Members of the Politburo*, by Mamyshev-Monroe continued to stir up public opinion. Four years after the artist's death, the Chairman of the Communist Party of Krasnoyarsk demanded an explanation, having seen the portrait series in the new halls of the Krasnoyarsk Museum Center, dedicated to Lenin.

In 2005, as part of the parallel project for the first Moscow Biennale, Mamyshev-Monroe presented a series of media celebrities' portraits titled *StarZ*. Embodying the distortion of the word (stars turning into starz) they revealed the corruption of a star. These



Detail from the series *StarZ*, 2005, by Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe.
 Collection of MAMM – Multimedia Art Museum Moscow

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

images of celebrities drawn from history, cinema, art and politics, such as Charlie Chaplin, Cicciolina, Mona Lisa, Vladimir Putin, Pope John Paul II, Hitler, Nicholas II, Alexis, the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Tutankhamun, and of course, Marilyn Monroe, differed strikingly from previous impersonations by the artist. These were empty shells of historical, political, pop culture stars; they became clearly alienated from the artist. If earlier, Mamyshev-Monroe had appropriated someone else's identity, according to the mimesis – so that it would be impossible to distinguish the 'copy' from the 'original', and there had been almost no gap between 'oneself' and the 'star' – these starz produced a terrible impression. The gap between the artist and his impersonations in the *StarZ* series seemed to have grown, and our gaze was turned to a trivial substance. *StarZ* reminded us: stars are born, they rise to the sky and shine, and they collapse.

Even the image of Marilyn Monroe was no longer one of an adorable sex symbol, but of a mask with fake boobs falling off, and a painted face that was falling apart. The light of the star dissipated, and approaching it, one could see the exposed surface of the glamour, under which lay the horror of failure, abyss, and emptiness. The disintegration of the star produced an uncanny effect.

All the *Starz* portraits have one thing in common – the unchanging backdrop of the Kremlin in Moscow. The Kremlin is an unshakable stronghold of power, crowned with stars. A starburst is happening in front of the symbol of power. All the *StarZ* of the new pantheon created by Mamyshev fade under the surveillance of the Vodovzvodnaya Tower of the Kremlin.

In *StarZ*, the stars suddenly lose their spell, they look confused. Politics and art, history and cinema stars, shining on the mass media horizon, fade away. And it's not because the mass media factory of stars issues defective products, but because the factory itself is nothing but an illusion. The star factory is a psychedelic crisis, a hallucinatory 'bad trip'.

The history of *StarZ* can also be seen from a different viewpoint. All of the portraits in *StarZ* could have been envisioned by one of the many city madmen who, having watched too much TV, suddenly realised that Mona Lisa, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, Patriarch Alexis, Nicholas II, Tutankhamun, and Hitler were all one – namely himself. Well, where else can you meet a king and a pharaoh, a movie star, a patriarch, a porn star, and a president all at once, if not in a psychiatric hospital?

In 2011, Mamyshev-Monroe undertook a special project for *ArtChronika* magazine, where he appeared as three personas: Yulia Tymoshenko, Dmitry Medvedev, and Vladimir Putin. A poster with the image of Monroe-Putin, included in this issue of *ArtChronika*, became a tool for a political standoff. The poster was distributed rapidly, and it was used by participants in protests against the country's 2011 election results. The poster was seen in the hands of both the left and the right.

The stardom of Mamyshev-Monroe is comprised of his dramatic talent for reinventing himself, and his performance skills, but primarily, as he himself said, it means 'permanent mutations in a multiplicity of varied characters'. Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe was an artist who called himself an antenna of the collective unconscious. Being a conceptual artist, engaging with history, he demonstrated in his work an amazing plexus of various discursive strategies; a critical discourse related to political realities and the media; a fairytale discourse, referencing the tradition of illustrating the Russian magic tales of the early 20th century; a psychedelic discourse that reveals a multi-layered and flickering nature of Mamyshev-Monroe's paintings; a multisexual discourse of a constant transgression of gender; a bureaucratic discourse of the party, absorbed with the symbolic milk of the mother, and brought to the disintegration of the stars in the *StarZ* series.

Translated by Ksenia Kaverina

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