

## A REPORT ON TRANSFURISM

A small group of Neo-Futurists or, as they call themselves, "transpoetry" or "transfuryism", has appeared on the scene in the Soviet Union and has produced a body of individual and collective works that are, while acknowledgedly in the spirit and tradition of the original movement, of sufficient quality, quantity and originality to merit critical attention. They have been mentioned briefly in "Samizdat Art", by R. and V. Gerlovin (1986:157) and there are some important materials on them in Kuzminsky's *Blue Lagoon Anthology* 5B (1986:508-65), but the present study will evidently be the first extensive survey of their works.

The core of the group consists of Ry Nikonova [Anna Taršis] and Sergej Sigej [Sigov], now living in Ejsk on the Asov Sea, and Boris M. Konstriktor [real surname: Aksel'rod (unconfirmed)] from Leningrad. Sigej and Nikonova, who are married, originally hailed from Sverdlovsk, where in the 1960s they had been part of a group called the "Anarfuts" (Anarcho-Futurists) which had published a handmade magazine *Nomer* (Number). The couple moved to Ejsk in 1974. In 1979, they were joined by Konstriktor, who had formerly been an Acmeist. For more on their history by Sigej see Kuzminsky (1986:546-61). The works by this group that have been made available for study include a number of initial and recent issues of the group's journal *Transponans*, separate collections by Sigej and Nikonova, a cassette tape entitled "Slušajte, kušajte" (Listen, eat!) with members of the group reciting their works, and a catalog from the group's exhibition in 1984. Sigej is also the author of a recent article on Oberiu published abroad (Sigov 1986). Since the journal, begun in 1979 and now numbering over thirty issues, is perhaps their most impressive achievement, we will begin with it.

Following accepted practice to avoid legal repercussions, each issue of the journal is expressly produced in only five copies. The front material in issue No. 1 (50 pp. plus appendix) states that *Transponans* was founded in 1979 under the editorship of Sigej and Nikonova and regularly prints the works of the "Transpoets" who include, in addition to the editors and Konstriktor, a. nik. [N. I. Aksel'rod, formerly of Leningrad, now in Western Europe] and the Leningrad poet Vladimir Erl'; that it will also include the works of other contemporary avant-gardists; that in its "publications" section it will print previously unpublished poetry by avant-gardists of the 1910s-30s with the help of Erl', N. Xardžiev and T. Nikol'skaja; and that it will publish a variety of theoretical/critical articles on questions of avant-garde poetry and art. Most of the first issue's over fifty pages of typescript are given over, in typical Futurist fashion, to numerous manifestoes, statements of critical position, and classifications of literary devices,

authored mainly by Nikonova. These closely resemble standard Futurist principles, but are milder and more practical in tone. One brief statement with some originality to it (at least from the perspective of Futurism) is Nikonova's "Stat'ja o serijnosti" (Article on Serialness), which has elements of Pop Art in it, though its sources are evidently different. It is concise enough to quote in full:

in 1963, having seen a "serigraph" by Ben Shahn, I experienced something like a creative jolt. consciousness of the set task came later. for about 10 years I unconsciously had been striving to classify the elements of human nature and its external profile into segments. in literature: movements, sensations, games, etc. in art: eyes, hands, rears, bellies, lips, breasts, etc. as though all this was prepared in the factory of nature in a massive quantity precisely in detail. the style of 20th century civilization is massiveness of production, the necessity of classifying products. what strikes the eye is not the face, but the crowd, and in the crowd what surprises and tires one is the similarity of elements. in order to kill something, it is necessary to create it and so I also am drawing my series "homo-eye" and "human rears", trying to find special qualities in the mass. but I also shuffle the elements which have been provided by nature in a certain, but not the only possible order. for example, teeth on the forehead, lips on the forehead, lips in the hair, eyes on the neck, etc. this, in my view, corresponds to an unseen reality. (:14)

Nikonova follows this by an extensive "teoprakt" (:15-28) which details devices of literary practice that are in effect a catalogue of "sdvigi" (dislocations) from the Futurist canon, e. g. "emancipation of conjunctions. one can link words in a sentence by any particles", (:15), or "everything new is better than Mozart, but not every change leads to something new." (:19)

The actual poetry selections are comparatively brief, ten pages of short poems by Sigej and Nikonova (:29-39). Sigej's four poems, dated 1976-77, are done by hand with a marker and a ballpoint, necessitated in part by their inclusion of old Slavonic letterforms, such as *A*, and other graphic elements. One of these, "In honor of Vasilisk Gnedov", consists of a long blank space between two parentheses, plus sketched-in hands, some *zaum'* words and wavy lines. Nikonova's poems are more varied, ranging from a surrealist "microplay", "Only for Rembrandts", to miniatures full of wordplay à la Xlebnikov, such as the following poem:

Stradaniem  
Miem  
Stradam  
Uniem  
Vym' (:38)

(By suffering/Ging/Suffeg/Oring/Vig)

The body of the issue ends with short reviews of books by Erl' and Boris Vantalov [Boris Mixajlovič Aksel'rod]. Since these reviews are at times not very complimentary, the copy at hand appends a footnote dated 1983 which explains what might seem an odd situation, in which the journal criticizes its own associates, by pointing out that only after these reviews were written did a close relationship with Erl' and Vantalov develop. Clearly this copy is a later reprint of the first issue, which explains also why it was possible to list the complete contents of the next 16 issues of *Transponans* as an appendix (quite valuable since only one other of these issues was available; helpful also is the Supplement to No. 19 in which the contents of Nos. 1-19 are reviewed in annotated form). The cover of this issue is a linocut by Sigej, and the original issue also evidently included a few pages of additional material by M. Taršis and Sigej that were omitted in the reissue.

Judging by the No. 19 Supplement, succeeding issues concentrate much more on literary works, the contents of No. 2 consisting mostly of poems by Sigej (some from as early as 1963-64) and Nikonova, with two contributions by Valerij D'jačenko. Theoretical portions deal with books in new shapes (sculpture, vases, bracelets, etc.) and in "vandalized" form, i. e. cut in half with a hole in the middle, and with collages. No. 3 (1979, 65 pp.) was the only original issue of this first large group available for examination. This issue, with an original hand-colored ink drawing by Taršis (Nikonova) on the cover, is clearly a first edition and not a later reissue and contains the first contribution by Boris Konstriktor, a panegyric in prose to his typewriter titled "Reč' v zaščitu samogo tebja" (Speech in Defense of You Yourself). This is followed by three brief plays by Taršis from 1977-79. The first, "Starcy" (Elders) is an absurdist mystery play parody with an extensive list of characters with tag names who mostly emit incoherent exclamations. The cover drawing seems to be related to this play, since it depicts two whimsical figures, one of whom appears to be a monk. The second play, "Sferičeskij teatr: Zritel' i večno" (Spherical Theater: Spectator and Eternally), is rather the description of a theatrical happening than an play as such, since it contains no dialogue, but only a scenario in which balloons with ropes tied to them are used to wrap and annoy the spectators, until one of them leaves, upon which a shot is fired off-stage, indicating the spectator's suicide. The play ends in darkness, the ropes are detached from the balloons, there are fireworks, and fruits are served to the audience. The third play, "Migmalion", a take-off, it seems, on Pygmalion, also has no dialogue, but only aimless movements by the hero in the magma of the earth's center at some prehistoric time. The contributions by Sigej, 16 short poems, show him to be very much in the Klebnikovian mold with his neologisms, plus phonetic spellings and a certain amount of anti-aesthetic imagery. Perhaps the most original device he employs is the formation of neologisms by syllable overlap, e. g.:

rybezdná želaniĭ lunizmennyx  
ljubezdná želannyx rybolej  
ljudulju grustonnuju kaŭet mne (:30, 1975)

Vantalov contributes a short prose on the current lamentable state of culture in the city built by Van'ka Kain, i. e. Petersburg. This is followed by Taršis' "Sxema rasskazov" (Schema of stories), which is a one-page matrix of three male and three female characters (heading the columns) and three numbered "thoughts" (the rows). In each space in the matrix is a brief, sometimes one-word statement from the respective character out of which we can build a collective situation to which the statement is a contribution, in the manner of Il'ja Kabakov's conceptualist paintings and albums. The remainder of the issue contains several short pieces by Taršis and one long, ponderous one by Sigej, most striking in these being the surprised report by Taršis after a tour of the Leningrad art exhibitions, official and unofficial, in the summer of 1979, that the official exhibits (Čestnjakov, Drevin) turned out to be more interesting than the unofficial ones (Maslov, L. Bogdanov, Sterligov and his school). This view is supported by Sigej's essay, which rambles enough to include as its most interesting material some extensive selections of poetry by A. Nik.

The next available issue of *Transponans* skips far ahead to No. 21 (Feb.-Mar., 1984). In the interim, judging by the information in the bibliographies already mentioned, the journal has grown in scope: it has more contributors, more pages, a greater variety of materials and physical properties. These features are fully reflected in No. 2 (21), which has works by over a dozen writers, 180 pp. using both sides of the paper, materials ranging from original drawings and collages to first publications of archival documents and photographs. The format remains chiefly carbon-copy typescript, but, in addition to the art just mentioned, includes poems typed and/or collaged onto round or leaf shaped pages, and even a composition by Sigej on a sequence of diagonally cut pages and a strip in which the interplay of the page shapes and word segments pasted on them is part of the fun of the work.

The first item in the issue is a Futurist/Dadaist "opera" (fragments) by Konstriktor and a certain Džonsi Gej, who seems to be a cross between John Gay of Beggar's Opera fame and Sergej Si-gej, and is titled "Žizn' za Tčara" (Life for Tzara), which in turn results from replacing the hero of Glinka's opera, *Ivan Susanin* ("Life for the Tsar" was its original title), with the Dada leader Tristan (referred to in the text as "Dristan") Tzara. The work is a hilarious pastiche of avant-garde foolishness, in which, by the way, Igor' Terent'ev and Il'jazz [Il'ja Zdanevič] also put in cameo appearances. There are poems and some prose by Igor' Baxterev (the last surviving Oberiut), Nikonova, Sigej, Konstriktor, Boris Kudrjakov, Konstantin Zvezdočetov (a member of the Moscow group Muxomorj (Toadstools), A. Al'tšuler, L. Aronzon, and Kari Uniksova. The

Publications section contains the authoritative text for Kručenyx's poem "Velimir Xlebnikov in 1915" (n. d.), a selection of poems by Vasilisk Gnedov from 1913 to 1973, and a section "Vokrug Xarmsa" (Around Kharms) edited by Vladimir Erl', which includes previously unpublished poems by Xarms, Zabolockij, Olenikov and N. A. Tjuvelev, and K. Vaginov's second afterword to his novel *Kozlinaja pesn'* (Goat Song), all of these accompanied by an introduction and annotations. Erl's active involvement in the journal began, by the way, with No. 5 (1980), to which he contributed some poems and curated a prose piece by A. Vvedenskij. His association with the Transpoets evidently began after they attended his 1979 lecture on Xarms (*Transponans*, Supplement to No. 19:20). Following "Vokrug Xarmsa", a Translations section provides Russian translations of poems by Hans Arp, Anselm Hollo, Franz Mon and Gerhard Rühm which were clearly chosen as consonant with the journal's orientation. The remaining sections, Theories, Bibliography, Criticism, Chronical, and Declarations, are of less interest in this issue. The first contains a rehash of the use of extra-literary materials (signboards, laundry lists, etc.) among the Futurists; the next "reviews" of works by members of the group, many of which seem to be self-reviews, and inexplicably includes a list of what appear to be rules or declarations by Erl' in which letters are deliberately omitted in every word, making the whole thing an exercise in zaum'; the Criticism section has useful annotations to the poetry of Al'tšuler and Aronzon that appeared earlier in the issue, plus an introduction and examples of poems by Dmitrij Prigov written on leaf-shaped pages; chronicled in the next section are public Leningrad poetry evenings in Feb.-Mar., 1984, in which S. Stratanovskij, S. Magid, A. Dragomoščenko, V. Krivulin and, in a separate event, E. Švarc read from their works; and finally a brief declaration that argues that futurism is not dead, because some Greek has stated that invasions by the Varangians (read: futurists) periodically repeat themselves. All of this is valuable more as documentation of literary history than for its own intrinsic merit.

The next issue at hand, No. 5(24) (Sept.-Oct. 1984, 137 pp.), is the first one to impress by the more or less uniform high quality of its contents, beginning with the cover drawing by Vladimir Ufljand which depicts a branching tree of the Russian alphabet growing from the ground of a variety of mystical symbols. The frontispiece is a letter collage list of names of famous literary figures grafted to each other:

Rablejkin  
Gjugogol'  
Bodlermontov  
Rabindranat  
Pinkerton

This is identified in the table of contents as a "collective declaration-parody by the group of "Atomists" on surrealist "genealogies", Moscow, 1930". The first regular item in the Theory section is Vladislav Len's "Tree of Russian Verse", which presents a chronological collage-diagram-genealogy of the period 1955-80s in which major poets and trends of those decades are related by a color-key to what are seen as the three main roots of these poets' work, namely, Kljuev, Kručenyx-Xlebnikov, Mandel'stam-Pasternak. The diagram has a legend in which the various figures and groups are clearly identified. Although, as Nikonova says in her appended note, opinions may be expected to vary on the designations, names and groupings, I think even the most well-informed observer will find useful data in the "tree". The Practice section contains substantial poems by Lev Kropivnickij (from 1962-81), Nikonova, Konstriktor and Sigej, plus a few poems each by Feofan Buka, Igor' Baxterev and A. Nik. Most striking in this section are Nikonova's "gesture poems" in which individual words or phrases are accompanied by a sketch of a person or a hand making a gesture that is linked to the verbal material in some mysterious way. This genre has been extensively developed by Nikonova, and is the focus of several of her solo books, which will be discussed below. Nikonova in these and others works here shows herself to be the most protean and inventive of the group, while the others are content to cultivate the traditional futurist garden, nevertheless with respectable results. The Criticism section contains two long critiques by Nikonova, one on No. 3 of the Leningrad samizdat journal *Obvodnyj kanal* (:65-93), and a second on Genrix Sapgir's "Poema-predostereženie s tvoim učastiem BYT' MOŽET", 1981 (:94-99). The first article surveys in detail the contents of the given journal, which includes poetry by Dm. Bobyšev, O. Oxapkin, Ju. Kolker, Lixtenfel'd, E. Pudovkina, I. Tajlov and Arno Cart, prose by Vl. Alekseev, Ev. Zvjagin, A. Oniplok and Lavinija Voron, and criticism by A. Stepanov, St. Jurev and K. Mamontov, and takes a jaundiced view of most of it. Nikonova, taking a cue from Kručenyx, points out instances of "kaki", i. e. similes using "kak", but referring also to the anal eroticism of "kaka", thus holding such clichéd poetic devices up to scorn, and she generally attacks lack of originality in any form, unless it imitates Futurism. She finds an absence of theoretical principles in the journal's criticism and a lack of visual interest in its design. On the other hand, the Sapgir poem fares well, and she singles out for praise its most futurist features, such as passages of phonetic or morphological *zaum'*. Most interesting and, from the literary-historical-informational viewpoint for Soviet readers, perhaps most valuable is the Bibliography section in which Sigej describes and presents excerpts in Russian translation or transcription of Iliazd's monumental *Poésie du mots inconnus* (Paris, 1949), one of his greatest book-works and the first international collection of transrational poetry, with lithographs by Picasso, Braque, Miro, Legèr, et al., and poems (mentioning only the ones presented in

*Transponans*) by Artaud, Ball, Beauduin, Bryen, Iliazd, Poplavskij, Schwitters, and Seuphor. In the Publications section, Kručenyx's "arabeski iz gogolja" from his late period (date not given) is presented. The Chronicle briefly lists performances by the Transpoets in 1984 and gives a brief interview with Baxterev on them. The issue ends with a wonderful photograph of Baxterev and Sigej standing before the latter's abstract portrait of the former at the Leningrad non-conformist exhibit "Facets of the Portrait" (Sept. 17 - Okt. 8, 1984). Since this issue also announces the appearance of a supplement, Feofan Buka's *Kručenyxiada*, let us briefly go to it.

Feofan Buka, which must be a pseudonym, is described as being "Kručenyx's closest friend" (*Transponans* No 24:122), but is otherwise mysterious. According to Gennadij Ajgi, Kručenyx did not usually associate with other poets, Nikolaj Glazkov being the only contemporary he recognized. However, judging by the dates of Buka's poems in this collection (1943-63), it is possible that his friendship with Kručenyx simply predated Ajgi's acquaintanceship with Kručenyx (*Transponans* No. 30 has a photo showing Buka and Kručenyx making merry together). The collection, edited and designed by Sigej, consists of nearly 200 short poems by Buka to Kručenyx, the majority of which, ironically, are traditional syllabo-tonic rhymed quatrains with only a certain amount of verbal exuberance, despite their constant hymn of praise to the great Futurist-*zaumnik*. Of course, Kručenyx's own poetry of this period was notably more conservative than it had been in the heyday of Futurism. Nevertheless, the poems are lively and seem to have been written for various occasions (birthdays, holidays, visits), and doubtless pleased the recipient by their mock-epic playfulness. Particularly amusing are the various metamorphoses of Kručenyx's name scattered throughout: Kruč, Kručik, Kryx, Čertenyx, Zvučenyx, and even Xynečurk. The design of the collection is attractive: the typescript of Buka's poems is periodically interrupted by bright, dynamic (perhaps one could even say lyrical) letter collages done on alternating light blue and terra cotta construction paper on full pages or one-third page strips with scattered words from Kručenyx's *zaum'*. Pieces of the famous "Dir bul ščyl" are spaced throughout and thus create a kind of structure for the whole.

Issue No. 25 (Nov.-Dec. 1984) of *Transponans* is in many ways the grandest of them all, in the usual format, but with a damask flower-print fabric cover and 343 pages of text, plus numerous photographs, collages and even several original art works. In addition to writings by the usual contributors, it includes a theoretical essay by Il'ja Kabakov, "An author looks at his work twice" (:11-14), a long, semi-*zaum'* poem by Baxterev, "LU" (1954-84) (:85-101) and a beautiful lithograph by An. Vasilev for Kručenyx's [and Xlebnikov's] "A Game in Hell". Important in the Publications section is presentation of the complete text of Kručenyx's "slovo o podvigax gogolja" (The Lay of Gogol's Feats, 1943-44)

(:160-80) with valuable commentary by Sigej. In the Commentary to Practice section Sigej also provides a useful explanation of his and others' poetry of word fragments (*otkusy*), to wit: the fragments present provide an initial semantic impulse, while the absence of a full word allows (forces) the reader to fill in the gaps in a variety of ways (:147-49). The Bibliography section presents Sigej's "retelling" of A. N. Čičerin's *Kan-Fun* (1926), a key text in Konstruktivism. Čičerin, a hero of the Transfurists, provides a surprise link between the group and the present writer, when on p. 313 of this issue Nikonova refers to my brief article on Čičerin (1981:48-49) and quips: "now even the Americans have discovered him, while the journal *Transponans* has been propagandizing for him as early as 1979." Give us time; we Americans are little slow on the uptake. It is nevertheless amazing that Soviets can keep so well informed about even minor happenings in the West. In this section on Criticism, Nikonova provides nearly a hundred pages of tedious, tendentious, but useful, reportage and comments on recent art exhibits and unofficial publications. Finally, the issue includes excerpts in photographic form of a collective work, IR FAER, in which the Transpoets and Dmitrij Prigov have taken a book of poems in Ossetian by the Ossetian poet Xetagurov with illustrations by M. Tuganov, dating evidently from the Stalinist period, and transformed it by blotting out words, adding lines and drawings to both text and illustrations, with affects ranging from the absurd to the mystical (:205-16). Irfaerism has been succinctly defined by Sigej as "using a ready-made form with the goal of creating a new ready-made form" (Kuzminsky 1986:552). Evidently the Irfaerists saw themselves as a new movement, because they elsewhere issued a manifesto (*Transponans* No. 18, 1983, excerpted in the 1984 exhibition catalogue) and saw themselves as operating together on this basis, though only ephemerally, it seems.

After this tour de force, the next issue (No 26, Jan.-Feb. 1985, 90 pp.) could not help but be less profuse. It contains only two sections, the usual Practice (:5-76) and Criticism (:79-89) and only two pages of graphic interest: a simple collage and a page with cut-out circles by Konstriktor. The works in the first section are on a consistently high level and present some new names, Genrix Bufarev with poems in a Xlebnikovian neologistic vein, Leon Bogdanov, who is focused on in the next issue, and the Moscow Conceptualist Andrej Monastyrskiĭ with a prose text describing the happening "Muzyka vnútri i snaruĭi" (Music inside and out). Criticism deals with the works of Konstantin Kuz'minskiĭ in an appreciative but not reverential tone. Issue No. 27 (Mar.-Apr. 1985, 162 pp.) regains full scope with a greater variety of contributors and materials. Nikonova's exuberant visual materials (collages, transparencies, cards strung on a rick-rack and a folded "Fan of Space") are particularly notable. Sigej experiments with lettering done with solvents on a photograph negatives. Konstriktor's poems and collage-drawings done on what seem to be bibliography cards for various



German books are more interesting than usual. And an additional sample of Leon Bogdanov's works is presented. Bogdanov, a Leningrad avantgardist and the subject of a critical essay by Nikonova, is known to her only through his works and is described as having passed through the usual influences of "Zen and Steiner, Lao-Tse and Chakrama, Klebnikov, insanity, pornographic abstract, 'stream of consciousness', épatage, and the 'dreams' stylish in the 60s" (:98). The amorphousness and variety of his works are praised. Indeed the relatively limited number of works presented in this and the preceeding issue show a range of styles and methods from surrealism to minimalism. His compositions date from the 1960s to at least 1974, but it is unclear whether he is still alive and writing at present. As usual, the Publications and Bibliography sections present valuable materials, in this case the complete text of Xarms's "Mixail" (Michaels, 1925) and the final version of Vvedenskij's "Elegija" (Elegy, 1940) from the authorial manuscript held by N. Xardžiev.

Given the active visual qualities usual in the editors' works, it was only inevitable that the journal should eventually break out of its quadrilateral strait jacket. The next and final issue that comes to hand, No. 30 (Nov.-Dec. 1985, 153 pp.), does so vigorously. Each of the major sections has a different page shape: Practice--square with a triangle cut out of the middle of one edge to form an M shape, Theory and Criticism--an isosceles triangle, Publications--strips, Translations--a rectangle. All of these extend beyond each other at some points. Inside, the various texts are fitted to the page shape, making the original typing a rather complicated task, no doubt, but the reading a visual and tactile delight. The most interesting work in the Practice section is perhaps Nikonova's "pa de katet" (Pas de cathète, 1985), which is a series of 63 variations on two initial themes "1 KILL ME, BUT DON'T TOUCH MY DRAWINGS (Archimedes)" and "2 THE SQUARE OF THE HYPOTENUSE IS EQUAL TO SUM OF THE SQUARES OF EACH OF THE TWO LEGS (Pythagoras)". These themes are then submitted, both separately and in combination, to numerous visual, graphic and semantic transformations which incorporate drawings in colors and variations of every imaginable sort. The final variation reads:

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One square of one hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the two legs, if you don't kill me. But don't meanwhile touch my two gray damp drawings, for I am one and you are one, but the people are many.

Judging by the catalogue of the group's 1984 exhibit, Boris Konstriktor is the author of six books of poems from 1980-83, but, since none of these individual books are available, an impression of his work must be gotten from his contributions to *Transponans*. His contributions to No. 30 are characteristic. His

poetry is rather artificial, that is, the usually takes some design or compositional concept and applies it abstractly and dryly to his material, often with predictable or uninteresting results. A better than average case here is his poem "A girl and death" (1985), which begins as follows:

ne podvedeš' glaza  
ne vyjdeš' zamuž  
ne ujdeš' zamuž  
ne rodiš' rebenka  
ne polučiš' kvartiru

(if you don't lower your eyes/you will not get married/if you don't get married/you won't have a baby/if you don't have a baby/you won't get an apartment)

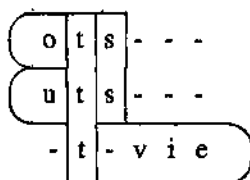
The negative contingency statements become rigidly ordered, are usually stated twice - once as the result of the preceding contingency, the second time as the new contingency - and tend to recur in the course of a lock-step logical progression toward the conclusion:

ne polučiš' po morde  
ne vyjdeš' zamuž  
ne vyjdeš' zamuž  
ne poznaeš' zakony  
ne poznaeš' zakony  
ne budeš' mertvoj  
ne budeš' mertvoj  
ne staneš' živoj  
ne staneš' živoj  
ne budeš' mertvoj

(if you don't get hit in the face/you won't get married/if you don't get married/you won't get to know the laws/if you don't get to know the laws/you won't be dead/ if you aren't dead/you won't become alive/if you don't become alive/you won't be dead) The instructional tone of a parent to a daughter and the awful implications of inescapable contingencies reveal a social tragedy, but the mechanical form is too repetitive (through 65 lines) and becomes monotonous, thus diluting the impact of the conclusion. On the other hand, Konstriktor's collages are invariably interesting and inventive.

Genrix Sapgir, the Moscow avant-garde poet, who has been an occasional contributor to previous issues, appears in photographs here, and seems to have become as active a presence as Baxterev has been. The excerpt from his 1963 book *Molčanie* (Silence) fits in well with the others' works and he joins the three in a collective poem "ex trax bax" (July, 1985). The triangular Theory and Criticism section contains two interesting essays by Nikonova and a tribute to Baxterev by Sigej. In the first essay, Nikonova points out that in previous literary

practice the visual orientation of the writer and the reader were identical, with letters ordered in lines to be read from left to right. But this is no dogma, and if a reader feels the urge, he can read from right to left or diagonally. In fact, a text that permits varied reading strategies is more perfect than one that is "monotonously oriented". In her own work, she has passed from spontaneous visuality where visuality to a phase is a consequence of the verse "construction". She illustrates this point with examples of her "vector" poems where repeated letters are aligned vertically and the whole is enclosed in a grid of lines and boxes that highlight correspondences. She notes further that if one is operating, for instance, with the abstract phonations of *zaum'*, then it is inappropriate to use the standard layout of traditional literature. In the second essay, she describes in detail the layout techniques in her vector poems. A brief example that will serve for both essays is the one-word poem "otsutstvie" (absence), which in vector form looks like this:



The Publications section provides poems by Malevič and Xarms and a photograph of Kručenyx with Feofan Buka, and the Translations section includes a re-Russianization of an Italian translation of a play by the Tiflis dada N. Šalimov and, unaccountably, extensive excerpts from Sigej's Notebook with some useful documentary material. Issue No. 31 has the same vari-shaped pages, but was unavailable for examination.

In sum, *Transponans*, in the issues surveyed and evidently also in those which are known only by bibliographical description, maintains a firm avant-garde stance which carries on and develops the Russian avant-garde "tradition" of the 1910s and 1920s, the influence of which has been thoroughly assimilated. Writings by the editors predominate, occasionally monotonously, but also with flashes of invention. Other consonant contributors are brought in whenever available, creating the impression of a small but active and growing creative enclave. Documentary materials supplied from the earlier period as well as descriptions of current activities have significant historical value and make the journal important for that reason alone. The visual features of many of the issues are remarkable. Because the journal is hand-produced, certain things could be done, such as collages, hand-lettering and -coloring, cut-outs, etc., that would be proscribed by mass production. As with many of the productions of the original avant-garde, each copy is not only automatically a bibliographical rarity, but also

an individual work of art. The fact that such a task could be carried on for more than thirty issues is a tribute to the editors' stamina and dedication. At the same time, and perhaps most remarkably despite the main editors' (Sigej and Nikonova's) provincial base in Ejšk, they maintain close contact in particular with Leningrad (obviously with the help of Konstriktor, who is married to Nikonova's sister), but also with Moscow and the international scene, making *Transponans* not just local in scope, but all-Union and in fact an organ of international avant-garde activities.

Along with the opportunity to study issues of *Transponans* came the opportunity to look at solo publications by Sigej and Nikonova. Sigej's talent as an artist is evident in his individual booklets which often have marked and varied visual contents. Several of them, though described as books of "poems", are in fact collections of drawings. "Stixi dlja skomoroxov XVI-XVII vv." (1985, poems for minstrels of the 16th - 17th centuries, 12 pp. ) contains an explanation on the cover that these are poems in body movement that will be performed by the minstrels at the Last Judgement. Inside are diagrams for such dances using stick figures written in black crayon. Another booklet in this series, "stixi dlja balerin Bol'sogo teatra SSSR" (1985, poems for ballerinas of the Bolshoi Theater of the USSR, 12 pp.), contains elaborate and fanciful diagrams for balletic movements with directions in French. And a third, "stixi dlja matrosof, vladejuščix flažkovobukvennoj signalizacii" (1985, poems for sailors who know flag-letter signals, 12 pp.), has poems made up of drawings of flags in what would appear to be the international maritime flag code, but I was unable to decipher them using the standard flag-letter correspondences. Perhaps the Soviet code differs. Another work of 1985, untitled, is an album of ten folded sheets on the left side of which is a photo, usually of the author, with portions of it cut out and then inked. The right side contains the impression that result when the sheet is folded, to which in many cases are added the pieces cut from the photos. Later items in the series become progressively more complex, the last two even having verbal elements. Yet another work, "pal'aplja dej" (n. d., 8 pp.), is a series of *zaum'* poems stencilled in large, crude letters over abstract white paper cut-outs.

Other works are in the tradition of the Futurist manuscript book. "Vseza" (n. d.) contains 23 pages of neologistic poems (1969-73) written carefully in green ink with collaged letters and strips of colored paper added. "Caroko X v izvlečenijax" (n. d., Tsarocco X in extractions, 16 pp.) consists mainly of Xlebnikovian poems written in black india ink or blue ballpoint on paper ovals which in turn are pasted on stiff paper pages of varying sizes. Sometimes Sigej uses archaic or fanciful letterforms which are made to look like objects ( "p" [Π] is a woman's head with a hat on it, while "v" [B] is decorated to resemble a pair of breasts seen from above) or adds doodles, creating the effect of a rebus and making reading an interesting challenge. Another, "Exona pikto i drugie stixi dlja

glazomozga i glaza 1969/1982" (Echoon picto and other poems for eye-brain and eye 1969/1982) is indeed a work of art with four dozen original manuscript graphic poems in black ink on fine art paper using verbal, pictorial and diagrammatic elements in myriad unique and sometimes very elaborate combinations, each page of which is interesting in itself and which together create an overwhelming impression of visual inventiveness. This is perhaps Sigej's masterpiece and shows off his original talents to best effect.

The remaining books, collections of poems in straightforward typescript, are less impressive, revealing Sigej to be a close imitator of the Futurist canon without much added of his own. There are three mostly-typescript books, "EKKA RTA, 1969-1976" (n. d., 18 pp.) "mašinopisnyj cobr vybr No. 3, 1963-1981" (1981, typescript sel wks No. 3, 66 pp.), and "doitel' golovnoj arfy" (c. 1984, milker of the head harp, 103 pp.). In these, one can see that he remains close to Xlebnikov, but one might further note that if Xlebnikov is the model, then it is incumbent on his followers not simply to repeat his experiments but to go on to use these newly established methods to produce significant works. The focus here is rather on the application of devices, which have now been named and classified, to miscellaneous materials. In this respect, the third collection, whose title is evidently a combination of "Doitel' iznurennyx žab" (a series of poems by David Burluk, 1914) and Tufanov's *Ėolova arfa* (1917), is more interesting than the other two, because its contents are more varied, including several long poems, such as "solovem idi razbojničat" (1971, go rob like a nightingale) which combines a folk subject with judicious avant-garde techniques to good effect, together with shorter conceptual works and prose, though the latter is usually indistinguishable from the poems except for the layout. However, I think it is appropriate to give the poet the last word, for which the following short poem from "sobr vybr No. 3" may serve:

celubna celunna  
guby xljabit izjumrot  
ona resničit grud'ju xolm  
ona lisičit uxom um  
i bešit ro  
al' rvet carlo  
bašen bro (45)

(salubrar salunar/a lip's oraisnald thoughts/she eyelashes the hill with her breast/she foxes mind with mind/and furies the mo/or tears the tsarlo/of towers thro)

Ry Nikonova, also an artist, has come across consistently as the most interesting and innovative contributor to *Transponans*. This impression is borne

out by her solo collections, of which, fortunately, a substantial number were available for study. Her "gesture" poems and "vector" poems, both mentioned above when encountered in *Transponans*, are the subject of separate collections. Judging by various references scattered throughout the materials, gesture poems emerged as an attempt to create a poem essentially wordless, though it might have a few minimal verbal elements, the focus of which would be a movement of the hands and arms. The roots of such poetry, if not its direct inspiration, are in Vasilisk Gnedov's famous "Poem of the End", which was performed by its author with a silent gesture, and whose published version consisted of a title and a blank page (Gnedov 1913: no. 15). Ideally, of course, such performance poems should be recorded on videotape, a medium doubtless not readily available to the author; attempts were made to capture a poem in a still photo (*Tararam poetra*, back cover). However, the main graphic medium chosen was a diagrammatic sketch of hands in positions or implied movements. A collection of these is "Partitura zesta" (1984, *Gesture score*, 13 pp.), but rather than being an attempt to outline the gesture involved, the diagrams of hands, letters and arrows take on an independent visual essence of their own, such that in many instances it is hard to imagine how the given sketch could be converted to a real gesture.

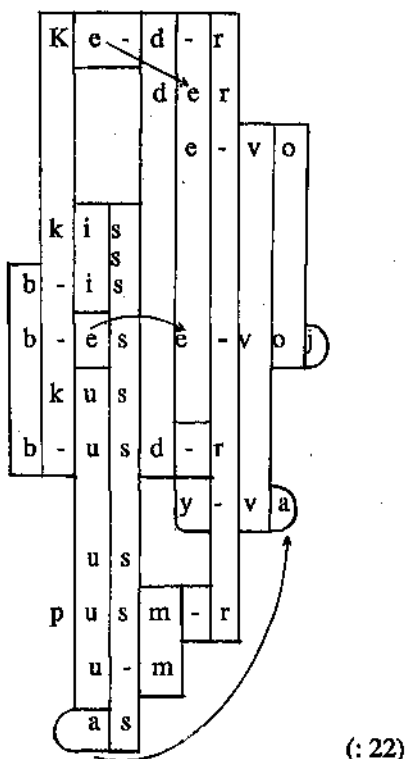
Logically the hand diagrams might become abstracted into arrows, but it appears that the real genesis was the reverse. "Vector poems", in which arrows with various straight or curved trajectories are combined with letters and geometric shapes, preceded the gesture poems and the latter resulted from an attempt to perform the vector poems at public readings. Nikonova's collection of vector poems, "PJAI----EZIJA" (1983, *Paee-oetry*, 98 pp.), is dedicated to Gnedov, another hero of the Transfurists and an associate in the mid-1970s, and is prefaced by an explanation that the poems arose from "a sensation of energy and direction (1979)", and were originally thought of as purely visual objects, but then the question of performance arose. The idea of performing such works by means of gestures led to a consideration of the boundary between art and non-art, and the preface ends with the following intriguing example:

when a poet eats an apple on stage, it must be clear that this is a poet and the apple is a line of poetry, otherwise this is not culinart but simply a cafeteria or a scene in a play.

Nikonova here and elsewhere shows herself to be a clear-eyed theoretician and well as practitioner (for more on culinart see Kuzminsky 1986:550-551). The given collection contains an extensive series of vector poems from 1981-83 with myriad possible combinations of visual and verbal elements hand-colored in marker and pencil. Nikonova's improvisatory inventiveness comes through when, in instances where the marker color has bled through the absorbant paper to the other side, she takes advantage of this patterning to create another work on the

reverse side. And in one instance an exhausted carbon paper produces an illegible second copy of a poem which is allowed to follow its original from the preceding page like a nearly inaudible echo. "Foro" (1983, 14 pp.) is a brightly colored collection of vector poems with the added element that the central square on many of the poems has been cut out so that portions of succeeding poems are revealed through the hole created, producing a layering and a sense of depth.

Another logical step is to take regularly composed poems and bring out their constructive, architectural features by visual means, as illustrated above by the rearrangement of the word *otsutstvie*. "BB" (1985, 62 pp.) is a collection of poems from 1963-85 which have been submitted to such treatment. Naturally, only poems with substantial numbers of repeated letters or words are amenable to such architectural transformation, but these include quite a few of Nikonova's earlier poems, and it is interesting to see the results. In essence, what happens is that repetitions in the poem, which are picked up by the ear unsystematically and form part of the sound orchestration and "music" of the poem but which are hidden from the eye by the usual non-constructive positioning on the page, are made to seem (or are revealed to be) prime organizing features of the poem by a layout that fully reveals all such repetitions. The architectural designs that result can be either classically simple or quite complex, depending on the repetitiousness of the given poem; and no two designs are identical, since the sound structure of each poem is unique. In addition to aligning repeated elements vertically, Nikonova uses vector arrows to link repeated letters that could not be aligned vertically because of other more important alignments. Furthermore, the repetitions the author chooses to highlight by vertical alignment are not always the obvious or predictable ones. As a result, the visual patterning of columns, boxes and arrows is often elaborate and interesting in its own right, furthered by Nikonova's addition of coloration, rounded and triangular edges, and purely geometric elements. In some cases, the letters and words are simply aligned vertically, without the use of lines, allowing one to compare this "naked" layout with the lined/boxed design. In the former, the verbal elements are foregrounded, while in the more frequent latter situation, the verbal elements tend to be submerged in the geometric grid design and an effort is required to extract them so as to get at the semantic level of the poem. In the latter case a high degree of defamiliarization is certainly present. As an example of medium complexity, the following poem, with coloration, alas, omitted for technical reasons, will perhaps serve:



The remaining collections by Nikonova that come to hand are anthologic in nature, surveys of her work in various styles from one vantage point or another. "Tararam poetra. Izbrannoe iz stixov 1959-1985 g. g". (1985, Tararam of poetr. Selected poetry 1959-1985, 41 pp.) is a basic chronological survey of her poetry and is highly useful for an appreciation of the progress of her creativity. The earliest poems display her roots in surrealism and the absurd:

Bogi den' roždenija Iisusa  
 praznujūt.  
 Perepilis' do očelovečivanija ...  
 Obkurili nebo papirosnymi tučami.  
 Poplevali na zemlju doždličkom.  
 Každyj po očeredi ...  
 Iisus čto-to poxabnoe pogremel.  
 Xoxočit bogi ...  
 Ždu ...  
 Skoro na zemlju pustye butylki padat'  
 budut.

1959



(The gods were celebrating Jesus' birthday. They were getting drunk to the point of becoming human ... They smoked up the sky with cigarette clouds. They spat to earth like rain. Each taking a turn ... Jesus thundered something obscene. The gods guffaw ... I'm waiting ... Soon empty bottles will fall to earth.) The irreverent playfulness of this early poem is characteristic of Nikonova's work throughout. By the late 1960s, formal concerns are more prominent and a broader orientation toward futurist devices and *zaum'*, e. g.:

Veliki po razmeram  
 Porazm  
 Porezm  
 Porezum

1969

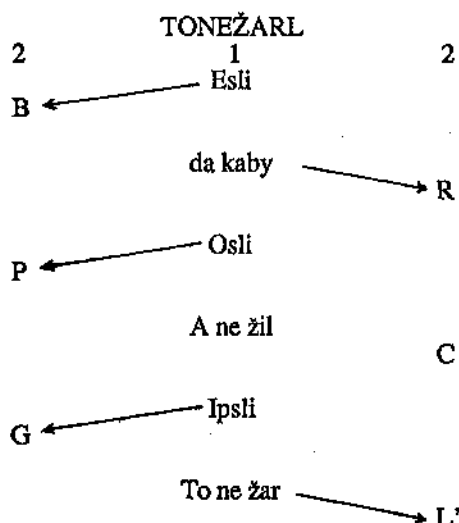
(Great in measure: Inmeasr/ Inmusr/ Inmusir)

Experiments along these lines continue through the 1970s until the arrival in the early 1980s of the vector, gesture and constructive poems already discussed.

Another collection, "Izbrazuzy. Rasskazy 1965-1981" (1983, Seletories. Stories 1965-1981, 66 pp.), traces in the sphere of prose roughly the same path from absurdism and automatic writing in the 1960s to increasing abstraction and focus on devices in the 1970s onward. Since stories are supposed to have a plot, a specifically prose formalization is the story "schema" (described above) which produces a minimalist outline of a plot. This would be the prose equivalent of a constructive poem. Indeed, many of the same devices are here applied to "prose", resulting in works that are indistinguishable from vector poems or sound poems. The final "story" in the book, "Pjat' toček" (1983, Five periods/dots), is perfectly minimalist in its graphic simplicity, consisting predictably of five dots scattered about a page that is otherwise blank except for the title and date.

Unquestionably Nikonova's most impressive achievement and one which shows off her protean talents most clearly is the two-volume compendium of "systemic poetry", *Tonežari* (1985, n. p.) in six "books" with a total of over 600 pages and well over 1 000 poems. It is designed as an exhaustive manual to illustrate the manifold avant-garde techniques used and developed by Nikonova and her colleagues. Perhaps the briefest way to give an idea of its scope would be to list the table of contents, but even that would take up several pages and the terminology would sometimes be unfamiliar. Suffice it to say that the full range of methods ranging from realism through hallmark devices of Futurism (*zaum'*, absurd, dislocations [*sdvigi*]) to contemporary orientations (minimalism, conceptualism) and to new Transfurist methods and, finally, transitional forms (literature and science, music, painting, theater, "civilization"), are all covered and exemplified from the author's own works. Whether there are any masterpieces among these examples is another question, but let me quote two poems

characteristic of different systemic approaches. The first is the title poem, from the section "Co-existence - Polyphony - Dialogues/Relays":



(ITSNOTAHITY/2 1 3 /If/B/and if/R/Donkeys/P/But didn't live/C/Ipsif/G/Its not hit/Y)

The second comes from the section on "Non-integrational conglomerates" from a larger section on combinations of styles and devices. It is a beautiful little lyric with emphasis on mellifluous sound. I quote it in its original, non-constructive variant:

Doždli lili  
Sedela melkoroza  
Selo lilovo selo  
I volos ros na rozy rost  
I mokryj golos pel

(The rainils poured/the prettyrose turned grayhaired /The village settled lily-like/And a hair grew on the rose's growth/And a moist voice sang)

Nikonova herself admits that inevitably some devices are more congenial and productive for a given artist than others and some devices are illustrated only briefly and weakly. Judging by the relative quantites od illustrations, her favorites obviously include the ones we have already discussed. Quite a few poems here and anthologized elsewhere come in more than one variant, and it is instructive to compare the varying effects of different layout practices. Many of the poems were given new constructive-architectural variants in 1985. Nevertheless, an im-

pression is created of the immense richness of possible techniques open to the contemporary poet, and one comes away wondering why the average poet is content with such a narrow repertoire of devices. I dare say that, where this work to be published in readily accessible form, it would soon become a standard reference manual on modern poetic craft.

The cassette tape "Listen, eat!" brings out another facet of the group's activities--audio-performance features of poetry, - and here it should be pointed out that a hallmark of the group's work in all spheres is making use of the perhaps unexpected advantages of whatever medium is being employed at the moment. In bookworks, the necessity of hand-making the books is turned to creative advantage in collages, cutouts, coloring, free layout, etc. On the cassette, which includes authorial recitations recorded in July, 1985, in roughly equal number by Nikonova, Sigej and Konstriktor, assisted by at least one other woman (Nikonova's sister?), while some of the items are simply straightforward readings of various page-texts, most incorporate effects that depend on sound reproduction. These include pure sound-poems, such as Sigej's "a a a aa a a", which, while it could be typed on paper and become a monotonous concrete poem scanned at a glance, in performance it becomes a rich and varied emotional experience, as intonation turns "a" into a question or an exclamation, and further vocal adjustments turn it into a laugh, a dog bark, or a musical pattern. Other poems have sound-effects either included or as their entire substance, including pouring water, paper tearing, dropping or tapping of objects, sounds from radio programs, and noises of various kinds produced by the mouth (heavy breathing, gargling, spitting, animal sounds). In such cases, a visual medium would be nearly helpless and sound reproduction is vital. Once again Konstriktor tends to be predictable, Sigej interesting, and Nikonova the star. The most impressive work, Nikonova's "Feminofobs", is a brilliant, eleven-minute series of variations on two themes: "1) Kurica ne ptica, 2) Cvetaeva ne Mandel'stam" (A chicken is not a bird; Cvetaeva is not Mandelstam), analogous to the set of variations in *Transponans* No. 30, but here focusing on sonic, rather than visual features, though one can imagine a printed version also. Variations range from semantic transformations to pure sound effects (such as eating noises interspersed with word fragments), and in an number of places a chorus of voices is employed.

The 1984 exhibit the group's works contained 58 bookworks, most of which, the catalogue points out, were manuscripts existing perhaps in a single copy. The catalogue, in addition to containing abbreviated versions of a variety of manifestoes and theoretical texts, plus two Irfaerist re-made ready-mades by Sigej (a dissected prjanik label entitled "it was I who ate Vladimir Erl's *prjaniks*" and a tomato juice label decorated in black marker entitled "Ry Nikonova's megaphone"), lists eighteen solo works by Nikonova, none of which have been included in this survey, and twenty-two works by Sigej, only one of which (Exona)

has been included. Therefore, there is much yet to be seen and generalizations about either poet's total achievement is provisional, particularly in the case of Sigej. Nikonova's achievements in toto are probably better represented by the materials surveyed and they seem to be less indebted to a single model than Sigej is to Xlebnikov. Nikonova's work has clearly moved the front forward, which is less clear in the case of Sigej and the other Transpoets. I am speaking here mainly of the Soviet-Russian context. Since context is all-important to the Conceptualist, it might be noted in fine that the work and activities of the Transpoets are quite daring in the Soviet context, even if they might be seen as standard avant-garde fare in the West.

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