

An Introduction to Maxim Komar-Myshkin's Vladimir's Night

The Russian author and artist Efim Poplavsky (1978–2011), known as Maxim Komar-Myshkin, once described his creative work as “private dreck.” Most of his writings and art were shared only with a carefully selected few, and his magnum opus, *Vladimir's Night*, was a complete secret unknown even to his intimate circle. Yet Poplavsky's self-deprecation in using the Yiddish term for rubbish to describe his creation did not in itself contradict his belief in the work's power to do actual, perhaps even supernatural, harm. Like a voodoo doll, this homemade contrivance aimed to harm a powerful and distant person, namely, Vladimir Putin. Art was thought by Komar-Myshkin to be parasitical rubbish for which discretion was becoming, and yet it could also hold enormous, indeed lethal, potential.

Soon after Komar-Myshkin immigrated to Israel in the late 1990s, he founded the Buried Alive group, a tightly-knit collective of young ex-Soviet artists, actors, musicians and writers. Here again the name is telling, for it conveys not only the rather morbid sense of humor typical of the group, but also the schizophrenic spirit of its activities. As their 2004 manifesto attests, Buried Alive were resolutely alienated from the Israeli cultural scene towards which they felt inherently superior, yet they were also experiencing tremendous hardship and insecurity stemming from their seclusion. For Buried Alive, the Moscow unofficial artists of the 1960s–1980s were thus not only a main source of artistic influence (*Vladimir's Night* is akin in form to earlier albums produced by artists such as Ilya Kabakov and Viktor Pivovarov); Buried Alive saw themselves as continuing the autonomous, intimate and publicly unrecognized existence that typified the Moscow circle: a self-sustaining artistic scene devoid of hierarchies or material value, based entirely on personal friendships and commitment, thoroughly disillusioned as to its possible recognition by official Communist culture, let alone the Western world. For Poplavsky, however, the name Buried Alive also conveyed the actual fear explored in Edgar Allan Poe's tale “The Premature Burial,” a fear which was deepened by the acute paranoia he suffered from.

It was only two years before he committed suicide that I met Poplavsky. At the time, I was working on a film centered on Avigdor Lieberman, the right-wing Israeli minister of foreign affairs. Lieberman was born in Moldova, and a large portion of his electorate consisted of ex-Soviet immigrants. The work I was doing was based on statements made by Lieberman himself, and thinking he might assume a somewhat different voice while addressing the Russian-speaking community, I needed help researching and translating Russian texts and interviews. Several of my art students recommended Komar-Myshkin.

I was struck from the start by the contrast between Poplavsky's sober irony and his fits of severe anxiety, laced with conspiratorial suspicion and delusional fears. I was soon to learn that these outbursts concealed greater suffering than I could imagine. For Efim Poplavsky believed that Putin had a personal vendetta against him. Even though he was anonymous, powerless, and had left Russia more than a decade earlier, Komar-Myshkin believed himself a likely target for assassination attempts. In fact, for a long span I perceived this fear as a running joke, and once I realize it was

not, I still could not draw from Komar-Myshkin a single detail as to the reasons for or the evidence of this threat – although I know these were ubiquitous and clear to him. These fears became exacerbated and led to the artist's almost total seclusion in the last weeks of his life. Vladimir's Night, in this context, was Poplavsky's secretive artistic retaliation: when the objects in the book torture, rape and kill the Russian leader, animism is literally employed to avenge a nemesis.

As I see it, Komar-Myshkin's animism is at the center of his artistic approach, while also pointing to the depth of his mental illness. Poplavsky's notion of animism was highly indebted to Freud, but, much like Breton and Dalí before him, he was interested neither in the progressive speculations Freud employed (relegating animism to the arcane and the primitive, following the tradition of 19th century anthropology), nor in the therapeutic horizon and scientific claims of psychoanalysis. Rather, he was enthralled by the radical potential that he saw Freud as releasing in regard to the power of the uncanny, and of animism in particular, to destabilize the very form (he would say “the body”) of art. In this sense, the unlikely hybrid of animated objects, political action and visceral sexuality and cruelty presented in Vladimir's Night was for him a means to convey a non singular, multivalent existence. Defying the border between the imaginary and the real, such existence is never classifiable, always disorienting, in other words: truthful. But tragically, the dissolution of barriers was for Komar-Myshkin not limited to art. He himself seemed to have crossed the border beyond which his nightmarish fears were inseparable from reality, and the degree to which inanimate objects were endowed with life was no longer under his control.

When Vladimir's Night was discovered among Poplavsky's effects, members of the Buried Alive group were divided about what its future should be. Several of his former colleagues felt that, true to Komar-Myshkin's way, the volume should remain a secret of sorts, privately changing hands in the tradition of samizdat, the dissident writings shared clandestinely under Communism. Still others thought the album deserved professional publication and translation, yet claimed its disorienting impact should not be softened by annotation and contextualization. Soon, however, the majority of Komar-Myshkin's circle concurred that the excessive teleology of paranoid aesthetics, wherein each image hides a plethora of references and associations, necessitated scholarly untangling. With both perspectives in mind, we have opted to relegate these notes to a separate section in the book. Vladimir's Night can thus be experienced without any interrupting element, or if desired with a serious attempt to decode its secrets and schemes.

While I consented to the request of former Buried Alive members to serve as the editor of this volume, I felt I could hardly do justice to the book on my own, being that I am neither a native speaker of Russian, nor privy to the nuances of the communal experience of cultural displacement and multivalence that informed Buried Alive and resonate in Vladimir's Night. The role of annotation was thus entrusted to Ms. Rosa Chabanova. A doctoral candidate in the comparative literature department at the Jaffa University, Ms. Chabanova is not only a distinguished young scholar of avant-garde Russian literature, but had been avidly present in the margins of the Buried Alive group for a number of years before Poplavsky's untimely death.

Another issue that needed addressing was the fate of Poplavsky's other works, much of which

existed – deliberately, to be sure – in an ephemeral, unresolved or unfinished state. We felt that Komar-Myshkin's collected writings merited a separate volume rather than being compiled in a lengthy appendix here. Nevertheless, Ms. Chabanova did choose to incorporate some of Komar-Myshkin's most important texts into her annotations, so that much of his sparse production can be encountered here in its relation to Vladimir's Night.

1

ВЛАДИМИР В СВОЕМ ЛЕТНЕМ ОСОБНЯКЕ.



ОН УЖИНАЕТ.

1

Vladimir is at his summer mansion.

He is having dinner.

2

ЛУЧШАЯ ИЗ ПОДРУЖЕК ВЛАДИМИРА С НИМ.



ОНА ТАК ЕГО ЛЮБИТ, ЧТО ПРИСЛУЖИВАЕТ ЗА СТОЛОМ НАРЯДИВШИСЬ, КАК ПЕС.

2

With Vladimir is his best girlfriend.

She loves him so much that she serves the meal dressed as a dog.

7

НАД КРОВАТЬЮ БОГ, ОН ОБЕСПЕЧИВАЕТ ПОДАЧУ ПРИЯТНЫХ СНОВ,



И ЧУЧЕЛО ГОЛОВЫ ЖУРНАЛИСТКИ - ВЛАДИМИР УБИЛ ЕЕ НА ОХОТЕ ПАРУ ЛЕТ НАЗАД.

7

Above the bed is God, to secure the serving of sweet dreams,
And the stuffed head of a journalist Vladimir hunted a few years ago.

8

ПРЕЖДЕ, ЧЕМ УСНУТЬ, ВЛАДИМИР ПЯЛИТСЯ В ШКАФ.



ЕМУ ВСЕ ВРЕМЯ МЕРЕЩАТСЯ ЛИЦА.

8

Before he falls asleep, Vladimir stares at his wardrobe.
He always imagines seeing faces.

10

ЧТО ТАМ ВЫСОВЫВАЕТСЯ ИЗ ШКАФА?



УЛЫБАЮЩИЕСЯ НОСКИ И ГЛУПЫЕ СВИТЕРА!

10

What is emerging out of the closet?

Smiling socks and silly sweaters!

ЧТО ТАМ ВЫЛЕЗАЕТ ИЗ ВЫДВИЖНОГО ЯЩИКА?

НОЖНИЦЫ, ПИНЦЕТ И - ПОДАРОК ПРЕМЬЕР МИНИСТРА ЗЕМБЛЫ: УТЮГ,



ТАБЛЕТКИ СЧАСТЬЯ, ПИЛЮЛИ ВЕСЕЛЬЯ И РАДОСТНЫЙ ПИСТОЛЕТ ИЖ С ГЛУШИТЕЛЕМ,
ПРИВЕТСТВУЕМ ВАС, ТОВАРИЩИ! - ПАЯСНИЧАЯ ТИКАЮТ ЧАСЫ!

What is emerging from the drawer?

Scissors, pincers and the iron, gift of the Zemblan prime minister,
Feel-Swell pills, Be-Gay caplets and a happy IZH gun, with a silencer.
Welcome, comrades, ticks the clowning clock.

14

ВЛАДИМИР ТАК ЧИСТ! НАМ ТАК ЗДОРОВО С НИМ!
КАКИХ ОЖИДАТЬ НА СЕГОДНЯ ПРОКАЗ?



ПИЖАМНАЯ ВЕЧЕРИНКА, ИЛИ, НА ЭТОТ РАЗ, КАКОЙ-ТО ОСОБЫЙ КОНГРЕСС?
И ХВАТИТ ЛИ МЕСТА ВСЕМ В КРОВАТКЕ ШЕФА?

14

So clean is Vladimir! We all want to get near!
What kind of frolics are in progress?
Is it a pajama party or, perhaps, a special congress?
And will there be room for all in the little leader's bed?

НЕТ, ЭТО ЯВНО НЕ ПИЖАМНАЯ ВЕЧЕРИНКА;
ТОВАРИЩИ РВУТСЯ РАЗДЕТЬ БАЛОВНИКА.



-ХВАТИТ, ЩЕКОТНО, - ХИХИКАЕТ ВЛАДИМИР.
ОН С САМОГО ДЕТСТВА ТАК НЕ СМЕЯЛСЯ.

It certainly is not a pajama party;
The comrades are eager to help our boy undress.
Stop, I'm ticklish, Vladimir giggles.
He had not laughed so hard since he was a little child.

ВЕЩИ ВХОДЯТ ВЛАДИМИРУ В ТЕЛО.



ЧУВСТВУЯ, КАК ОНИ НАПОЛНЯЮТ ЕГО, ОН ВСПОМИНАЕТ УЖИН.

18

ВЕЩИ ВХОДЯТ ВЛАДИМИРУ В ЛИЦО.



ОН ЗОВЕТ МАТЬ, НО ОНА МЕРТВА.

18

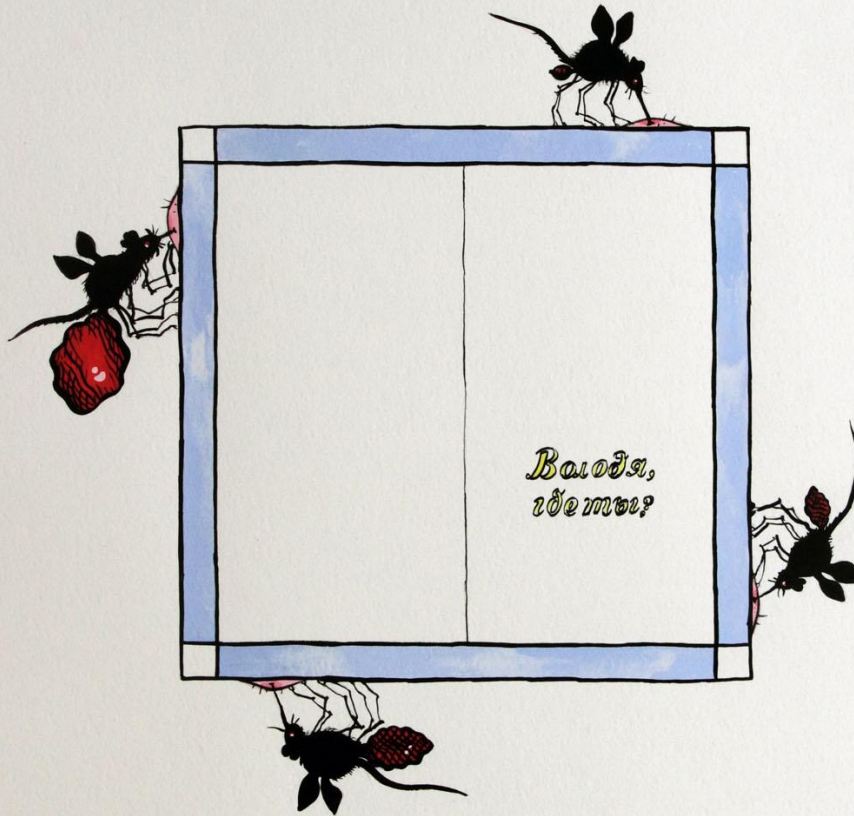
Things begin to enter Vladimir's face.

He tries to call his mother, but she is dead.

37

ВЛАДИМИР, ГДЕ ТЫ СЕЙЧАС?

В ГОЛОВЕ, ВСЕ ЕЩЕ ПОЛНОЙ НЕРВНЫХ ТИКОВ И ГРИМАС?



В ТЕЛЕ, ВСЕ ЕЩЕ НЕОТРАЗИМОМ В СВОЕЙ АНАТОМИЧЕСКОЙ ГРАЦИИ?

ИЛИ В ДУШЕ, ОБЖИРАЮЩЕЙСЯ СВОЕЙ ПРЕЖНЕЙ РЕЗИДЕНЦИИ?

37

Where is he now, Vladimir?

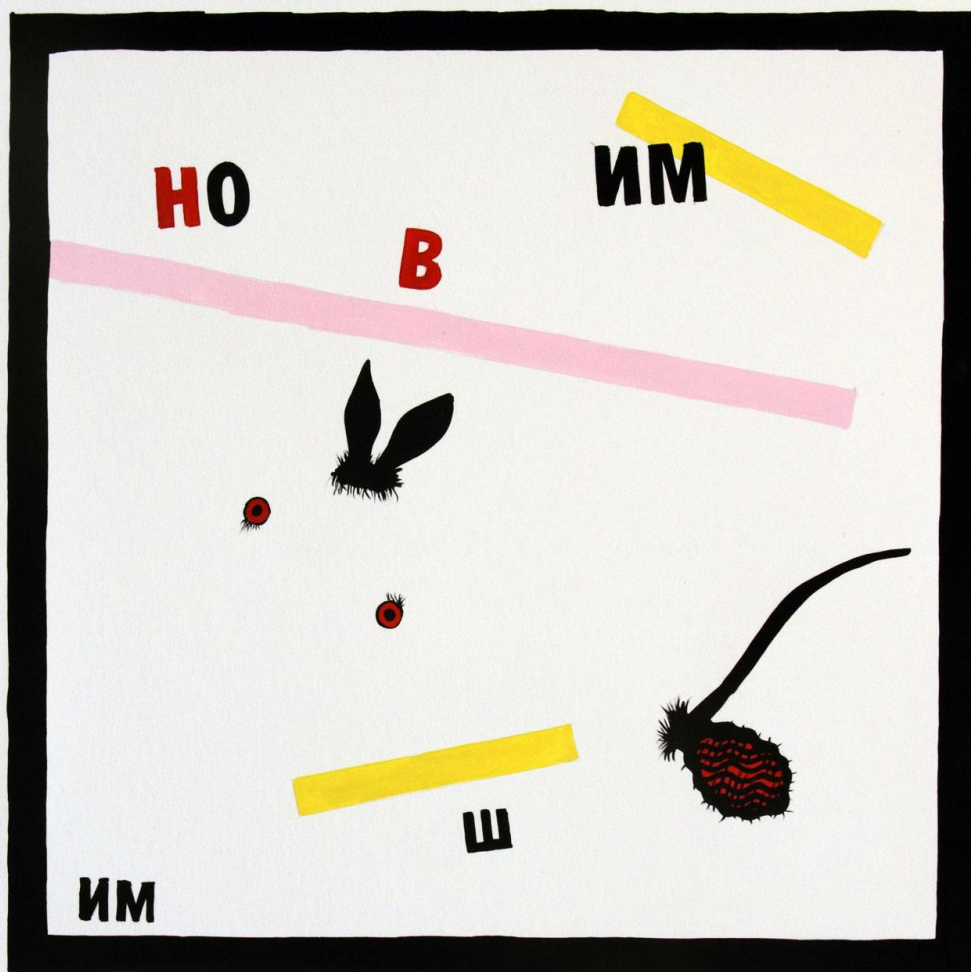
In the head, still rich with nervous ticks and grimaces?

In the body, still compelling in its anatomic grace?

Or maybe in the soul, that gorges on its former residence?

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А МОЖЕТ, ОН СПИТ СЕБЕ ТИХО В УЮТНОЙ ПОСТЕЛИ,
ВЕДЬ ВСЕ ЭТИ ПРЕДМЕТЫ - ВСЕГО ЛИШЬ ПРЕДМЕТЫ НА САМОМ ДЕЛЕ.



А МОЖЕТ И НЕТ. ПОМНИ, МОИ ДОРОГОЙ,
С ВЛАДИМИРОМ НЕ ТАК ВСЕ ПРОСТО, КАК КАЖЕТСЯ ПОРОЙ.

38

Or maybe he's asleep, so still,
For all those stills, for real, are only stills.
Or maybe not. Remember dear, with Vladimir,
Things are not what they appear.

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