

**Notes from the Opening of a Neo-Soviet House of Culture.**

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I travelled to Moscow for the opening of *Dom Kul'tury* (House of Culture) GES-2—a decommissioned power station transformed by Russia's richest man, Leonid Mikhelson, into a grandiose Renzo Piano-designed art space. First impressions were carceral: I was embarrassed to say it out loud for fear of sounding undergrad Foucauldian, but, as I made my way through the monumental central nave of this strange new oligarchic *Dom Kul'tury*, the association with a nineteenth century prison was overwhelming. Around 9 pm, a hugely popular rock band straight from the “wild capitalist” Russian 1990s (Mumiy Troll) started to play on a high podium overlooking the central nave. The bodies of Moscow's art world writhed to the din in joyful, tipsy dystopianism.

Indeed, layers upon layers of mildly nostalgic, complex allusions to the good old 1990s and early 2000s pepper the *Dom Kul'tury* opening program (brainchild of V-A-C Director Teresa Mavica and Icelandic art star Ragnar Kjartansson). Most extravagantly, in the nave itself, gingerly-recreated column-laden Californian promo film sets play host to a daily episode-by-episode Russian language site-specific re-staging of the American soap opera *Santa Barbara* (wildly popular in 90s Russia). More subtly, in the subterranean exhibition halls, gilded, Greco-Roman, hyper-affected, oversexed costumes and digital collages by 90s *enfants terribles* New Academy are cleverly, touchingly juxtaposed with earnest, empathetic frocks and watercolors by their St. Petersburg-contemporary *Gluklya* (Natalia Pershina). Amid the drawbridge-raising prudery of the late Putin era, it seems, Russia's period of post-Soviet hyperinflation-era libertinism constitutes a trendy (but fruitful) topic for contemporary cultural reflection.

Speaking of prudery, the President himself paid a hastily announced visit to the *Dom Kul'tury* a few days before the opening. Panic erupted, it is rumored, and at least one penis was hastily removed from the exhibition as staff scrambled to second-guess the sovereign's sensitivities. (Contrast to this the scene at the nearby Roman Abramovich-sponsored Garage Centre of Contemporary Art—which Vladimir Putin has never paid the honor of visiting—where a 17-minute two-channel close-up film of the Bulgarian performance artist RASSIM circumcising himself is currently on prominent display.) If the President's visit was intended as a gesture of support for his friend Mikhelson's heterodox hobbyhorse in troubled times, might it also portend a more direct future level of influence than the Russian contemporary art scene is accustomed to?<sup>1</sup>

Penises, Putin, and portents notwithstanding, *Dom Kul'tury* aspires to be, as Mavica also told VVP, “more than just a museum.”<sup>2</sup> It wants to be open, public, an “engine”—no longer for pumping electric power into the city but for electrifying it with currents of cultural and social transformation. In Mavica's words: “I dream of a big open circus, a Tower of Babel of sorts, where the voice of culture, borderless and fearless, can be proclaimed loud and clear!”<sup>3</sup> It would of course not be fair to judge

1. On December 28, 2021, after this text was sent to press, the Moscow art world was rocked by the news of Teresa Mavica's resignation from V-A-C after fifteen years at the helm. Rumor has it that the decision was Mikhelson's, and that Putin's dissatisfaction with this visit to the *Dom Kul'tury* was a factor.

2. “Prezident posetil Dom Kul'tury GES-2,” *Novosti na pervom kanale*, December 1, 2021, 01:05 at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6M2TTNfXdA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6M2TTNfXdA), accessed January 17, 2022.

3. Exhibition *To Moscow! To Moscow! To Moscow!* curated by Ragnar Kjartansson and Ingribjörg Sigurjónsdóttir (Moscow, Dec 4, 2021– Feb 27, 2022).

the GES-2's success in doing so on the strength of its Putin-hosting, champagne-guzzling opening weekend. As I walked through the cavernous carceral naves and the penis-free subterranean gallery spaces on the day following the opening party, by which time the building had opened to a (pre-booked) public, the demographic composition of the visitors seemed already more diverse than that of many contemporary arts institutions in the Euro-American world. Mavica and Kjartansson's populist soap opera gamble did seem to be generating buzz.

The question remains—what to do with Piano's impressive (but sterile) multi-level whitewashed penitentiary interior? If GES-2 is to function as (rather than merely to fetishize the name of) a proper House of Culture, should the interior not reflect it? All of the Houses of Culture I have visited in the former USSR were alive with the vital power of friendly flora. At least then let the Soviet tradition of filling institutional interiors with vast profusions of plants in mismatched pots flourish here. Let *monstera*s and weeping figs droop menacingly and lovingly over its carceral banisters, and let strategically-positioned oversized succulents stand in for the private parts (and politics) that, at least for now, are purged from its program.

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