



FEATURE - 01 OCT 2011

Day by Day

The photography and videos of Olga Chernysheva capture concentrated moments in the midst of daily Russian life

BY VIVIAN SKY REHBERG

The soundtrack to Russian artist Olga Chernysheva's most recent video, *Trashman* (2010–11), begins before the first blurry sequence of images materializes. Miraculously, that split-second of capacious orchestration is all it takes to situate us in the cinema where the work was made. The artist's camera slowly pans from the top to the bottom edge of the theatre's screen, where credits roll in the form of unintelligible smudges of light, lands on the vague, illuminated face of a young man, then swoops down to settle, now in focus, on his hands, which hold open a bin-liner. The audience files out and casually loads his empty sack with

oversized popcorn tubs, soft-drink cups and film programmes. The cinema's atmosphere changes with the soundtrack (in fact a montage of different scores), which shifts from uplifting to threatening to jaunty. But the young man's expression remains the same – alert, if somewhat indifferent. At one point, Chernysheva zooms in and lingers on his face, which glows in the beam cast from an exit lamp, then she swiftly cuts back to his hands, the laden bin-liner stretched taut over his fingers. No words are exchanged between the 'trashman' and the cinema patrons. Chernysheva's video fades to white before cutting to credits, which note that *Trashman's* 'star' is a guest worker from Uzbekistan. As these credits roll, parallel to those on the cinema screen, the young man faces the camera, shyly smiling for his close-up. Chernysheva's presence and point of view, until then fairly discreet, are more strongly emphasized in this final sequence; the artist films him from a low angle before retreating for a wide shot of the cinema interior. Then the video ends.

Trashman is emblematic of Chernysheva's work to date, which encompasses video, photography, drawing and painting. Its short format, straightforward framing and editing, and its focus on aspects of Russian daily life since the country's transition to capitalism, trace *Trashman* back to her earliest video work, *Marmot* (1999). In *Marmot*, where her documentary-influenced style was first established, Chernysheva's camera fixates on an older woman adjusting her fur-adorned garments, collecting her belongings and counting her change while a pro-communist demonstration carries on in the street behind her. Once the woman has dealt with her affairs, she takes a portrait of Stalin, faces it toward the street and sets off, presumably to catch up with the march.



Trashman, 2010-11, DVD still. All images courtesy: Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin, and Foxy Production, New York.

Both films record ordinary people in real-life circumstances. In both works the artist frames, shoots and lets the action run its course. The narrative is not pre-determined; it's contained within and generated from the filmed action, though sound spurs it along. Beyond Chernysheva's consistent choice of subject matter,

which indicates that she is deeply interested in and perhaps even identifies with the reconfiguration of class distinctions in post-communist Russia, these films are not explicitly critical of their subjects or of the time and culture in which they live. The ambiguous rodent reference in the title of *Marmot* could be affectionate or simply metaphorical – most likely it's a combination of both. Chernysheva's street-side camerawork is above all curious, spontaneous and empathetically voyeuristic, without positive flourishes or negative emphases. Although we might infer specific things about the woman in *Marmot* based on her age and clothing, or speculate on Chernysheva's reasons for filming her, the woman remains anonymous.

By contrast, *Trashman* seems more deliberate, if not exactly staged. The musical accompaniment and dramatic lighting of the cinema lend a theatrical air to the perfectly mundane scene. The autobiographical detail provided post-scriptum – that the main 'character' in the film is implicated in the organized labour migration from Central Asia associated with the economic restructuring of the former Soviet Union – provides a keener critical edge. It prompts us to mull over the underlying mechanisms that configure everyday experience in the post-Soviet states as well as the intertwined relationship between the mass accumulation, circulation and consumption of images and the systematization and circulation of cheap labour under advanced capitalism.

Chernysheva also addressed the issue of migration in a series of black and white photographs, 'To Moscow' (2010), which portray Central Asian coach drivers. She shot the pictures through the drivers' windscreens: some are speckled with raindrops, while others are replete with reflections of tree branches or sunlight, while the men behind them look concerned or bored or lost in thought. 'To Moscow' joins the artist's more well known photographic series of workers, such as 'Guards' (2009) and 'On Duty' (2007), which highlight stillness or boredom rather than activity or mobility. With labour comes questions of unemployment and leisure, and video works such as *Festive Dream* and *March* (both 2005) respectively treat the harsh reality of homelessness and poverty and the recuperation of a key Soviet cultural formation – the parade – for marketing purposes. In the latter, a group of schoolboys and pom-pom girls flank a red carpet leading to the Theatre of the Soviet Army, surrounded by bouquets of red, white and blue balloons printed with slogans like 'Glory!' and logos from Panasonic and Gazprom.



Marmot, 1999, DVD still.

If these fragments can be said to converge into a composite image of contemporary Russia, Chernysheva's work constantly reminds us that the smallest detail can thoroughly alter the perception and interpretation of what we see. She gently guides us into a mode of visual attentiveness that sharply contrasts with our current regime of visual over-saturation and compelled distraction. She urges us not to overlook the trivial or coincidental, where small but concentrated moments of aesthetic pleasure may suddenly emerge. This is the case in 'On the Sidelines' (2010), a series of photographs, displayed in light boxes, of a half-dozen glittering cut-crystal chandeliers strung from a horizontal rack built from tree branches on the curb of a two-lane highway. It is unclear whether this found and photographed set of objects is a roadside stand selling rich and antiquated relics of a glamorous past, a whimsically decorated bus stop, or installation art.

Frieze Academy

Join our inspiring talks
and courses on art, design,
architecture and more.

<<https://frieze.com/academy>>

Although much of her work engages with the street, Chernysheva's *Tretjakovka* (2002) and *Russian Museum* (2003), attend to the visual consumption of high-cultural heritage – namely, Russian figurative painting – in public spaces. In *Tretjakovka*, Chernysheva moves her camera over the surfaces of paintings at the Moscow State Tretyakov Gallery in time and to the tune of Modest Mussorgsky's piano composition *Pictures at an Exhibition* (1874). This piano suite 'depicts' a viewer's passage through an exhibition of paintings by Mussorgsky's artist friend Viktor Hartmann. Chernysheva matches variations in tone, key and tempo to genre and battle scenes in the museum; the camera zooms in and out, slows down and erratically sweeps over the paintings, thus distorting the images accordingly. *Russian Museum*, with its oddly chirpy Zen meditative music, focuses on similar paintings at the State Russian Museum, but the camera concentrates less on the content than on the reflections of the viewers in their glass-covered surfaces and the intersection of gazes that occurs.

In *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, first published in English in 1969, Siegfried Kracauer asserted: 'Small wonder that camera-reality parallels historical reality in terms of its structure, its general constitution. Exactly as historical reality, it is partly patterned, partly amorphous – a consequence, in both cases, of the half-cooked state of our everyday world.'¹ There is no doubt Chernysheva is invested in the parallel structural realities of the camera and of history. In her quest to adequately represent something of this current 'half-cooked state', she talks freely of her interest in 19th-century Russian realist painters, like Pavel Fedotov and Leonid Solomatkin, and filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Alexander Dovzhenko and Andrei Tarkovsky. When curator Cosmin Costinas recently asked Chernysheva whether her work could be characterized as nostalgic – a common label for art from the former Soviet Union and its satellite states – she replied that she doesn't think it is nostalgic for the past, but may be projectively nostalgic, which is, of course, oxymoronic. However, she suggested it would interest her artistically to 'make the present a point of nostalgia in the future'.² Given our collective future is likely to be even more overloaded with distracting sensory stimuli, increasingly sophisticated technological interfaces and forms of mediated communication, we might indeed look back with longing at Chernysheva's art as one that offered us a model of critical sensitivity and awareness toward our present – if only we had been paying attention.

Olga Chernysheva lives and works in Moscow, Russia. She has had recent solo exhibitions at 6th Berlin Biennial, Germany; National Museum Cardiff, Wales (both 2010); Foxy Production, New York, USA; and basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, The Netherlands (both 2011).

¹ Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, ed. Paul Oskar Kristeller, Markus Wiener Publications, Princeton, N.J., 1995,