

GIFT/KNOWLEDGE RELATIONS AT THE EXHIBITION OF GIFTS TO SOVIET LEADERS

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This is a study of audience reactions to the exhibition *Gifts to Soviet Leaders* (Kremlin Museum, Moscow, 2006) that ranges from comments in the viewers' response book to the decision of the Kremlin Museum to gift a copy of the exhibition catalog to President Vladimir Putin for his fifty-fifth birthday in 2007. My goal is to demonstrate how relations of knowledge, which configure this complex post-Soviet audience in the form of social memory, perform the gift and, vice versa, how gift giving performs these relations of knowledge and power. In doing so, this article contributes from a new angle to the gift theory and also to anthropological understandings of performativity. It is a study in "ethnographic conceptualism" that refers to anthropological themes and concepts as they can be used in conceptual art and also, conversely, to anthropology conducted as conceptual art.

Keywords: Gift; Knowledge; Gift/Knowledge; Performativity; Ethnographic Conceptualism; Conceptual Art; Power

Thank you for the exhibition ... [We] particularly liked the visitors' response book—each record is interesting and educating.

*What is striking is the imagination [fantaziia] of our people who have made these crazy objects and those who wrote responses in this book!
—Visitors' book, exhibition Gifts to Soviet Leaders, Moscow, 2006*

Above are some examples of visitors' responses to the exhibition *Gifts to Soviet Leaders* (*Dary vozhdiam*) that Olga Sosnina and I curated (Kremlin Museum, Moscow, 2006). The exhibition was open for just over a month, but it attracted a record number of visitors who queued not merely for entry but also for access to the visitors' book, where they took time both to read others' comments and write their own. The "crazy objects" that one response referred to were things like a cigarette holder in the shape

of Soviet nuclear missile heads (a present to Leonid Brezhnev), Brezhnev's bust made of cane sugar, a portrait of Joseph Stalin made of aviation screws, of Vladimir Lenin made of human hair (the work of a hairdresser) or of the rhymed text of Lenin's biography (Figure 1). These gifts were mostly sent from factories, state collectives, and regions of the Soviet Union, although many also came from international socialist movements and sympathetic governments. They were simultaneously a reflection of the inner workings of Soviet leaders' "personality cult" and of the global influence of communist ideas. Such was, for example, a photograph of a French Communist resistance fighter who was executed by the Nazis. Despite, or perhaps because of, this photo being the only one remaining of him, his mother decided to send it as a gift to Stalin for his seventieth birthday in 1949.



Figure 1. Lenin's portrait (fragments), 1987. A gift to Central Lenin Museum from B. F. Istin for the seventieth anniversary of the October Revolution of 1917; printed text on paper; courtesy of State History Museum, Moscow.¹

Note that the same exhibition visitor who called these objects "crazy" was also struck by other visitors' reactions. The area around the response book was one of the

¹ The portrait is a typewritten, and in parts rhymed, text of Lenin's biography. Fragment: He was barred from college and foreign travel. He entered a Marxist discussion group, lead by Fedoseev, and there had read Plekhanov, who was a liberalist but attacked the populists [*narodniki*] as much as he could. This was the time of populist revolutionary mood [in social democracy] and of idealist orientation that capitalism in Russia was a superficial and accidental phenomenon.

... Volodia and Krupskaja had a church wedding (before St. Peter's day [*petrovka*]) before lent, although he was an enemy of Christ. Krupskaja's mother ran the house. Lenin and Nadia wrote, translated, and read, and had pleasure in the field, by the river, and in the forest, honouring Siberian beauty.

The author thanks museums that participated in the exhibition *Gifts to Soviet Leaders* for kindly making the images available for publication.

most popular parts of the exhibition. It provoked laughter, anger, concern. The invocation “Stalin, come back,” written in large letters, is followed by an equally strong series of responses. Another visitor adds below: “How frightening that this all happened in our history!” Someone else adds, “In ‘your’ history none of this has happened,” and someone else: “What is frightening is that bitches like you are still

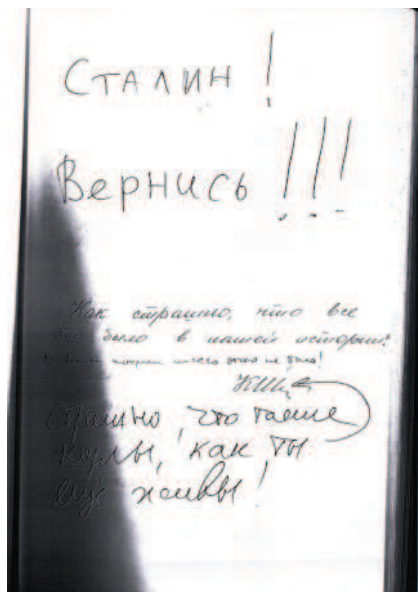


Figure 2. Comments in visitors' book, exhibition *Gifts to Soviet Leaders* (2006).

alive!” (Figure 2). It is these comments that visitors found “striking” and even “educational” when they wrote in their thanks that they “particularly liked the visitors’ response book.”

In saying so, the visitors performed an important transformation. They put the visitors’ book on a par with the exhibition display. They transformed the response book, and in a way the audience itself, into a peculiar artifact that can be viewed and studied like objects that we exhibited. It was as textual as some of the objects (cf. Figure 1). Yet this artifact was also very unlike the gifts to Soviet leaders we displayed. In the course of the exhibition it was continuously elaborated. Exchanges of opinion were open-ended. Discussions did not reach conclusion. While it was much more than a “fragment,” the visitors’ book nonetheless suspended incomplete both the meanings of the gifts on display, which

these visitors debated, and the composite social portrait of the viewer, which could be drawn from these reactions. If we displayed this book as a work of conceptual art, we could have called it *The Post-Soviet Public: Unfinished*.

ETHNOGRAPHIC CONCEPTUALISM AND GIFT/KNOWLEDGE RELATIONS

This peculiar artifact signaled a success in something that Olga Sosnina and I had intended (Sosnina and Ssorin-Chaikov 2009) and what I call “ethnographic conceptualism.” This term takes its cue from conceptual art or “conceptualism,” in which artists create art objects out of concepts and, most importantly in this case, out of audiences and their reaction to these objects. Ethnographic conceptualism refers to anthropological themes and concepts as they can be used in conceptual art—but also, conversely, to anthropology conducted *as* conceptual art. Ethnographic conceptualism posits a symmetry of art and anthropology, as a bridge that can be crossed in both directions (Ssorin-Chaikov, introduction, this issue). In this article, I use this connection only one way: to reflect on an ethnographic situation that this exhibition experiment produced. I treat ethnographic conceptualism here as a method that has a research output.

The idea of this conceptualist experiment originally emerged when Olga Sosnina and I felt defensive, rather than experimental, about the gifts project. In winter of 2004, our research was well under way. We were about to formally propose the idea of this exhibition to the Kremlin Museum and started discussing it with our Moscow colleagues. The difficulty we faced was the totalitarian vision of state socialism that at that time dominated the Russian intellectual scene in general and the museum's perspectives on Soviet history in particular. The sheer scale of gift giving, the diversity of objects that were given, and complexity of motivations of gift givers left no doubt that to view it as simply orchestrated from above was highly inadequate.

This complexity was controversial politically as well as aesthetically. Complexity too often appears in anthropology as the answer rather than a question, and it is not a satisfactory answer. To conclude that the phenomenon under investigation is complex invites the question of whether we knew this from the start. In our case, complexity was a prompt for the critique of the totalitarian approach to Soviet socialism. Gifts to Soviet leaders demonstrated the extent to which the Soviet-style relations of power were generated from below rather than imposed from above (cf. Tumarkin 1987). In this argument we combined Marcel Mauss's notion of gift obligation with Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality (Sosnina and Ssorin-Chaikov 2006).

As we developed these ideas we also found out how quickly complexity was linked with relativization, and that, in turn, with legitimation of the Soviet order. And, after all, did not having this project under the auspices of the Kremlin Museum make it complicit with the Kremlin's political agenda of the early 2000s? Were we not "propping up" the cult of Vladimir Putin and his ideology of the "vertical of power" by casting an academic legitimacy on the Soviet past? In the eyes of Moscow intelligentsia, we thought, this project could easily appear pro-Putin and pro-Soviet, if not Stalinist. In contrast, for some of the communist left, we anticipated, this project would not be Stalinist enough. In this perspective, we were likely to fail in showing how great Stalin was and how great he made "our country." Many gift objects seemed funny, and to pro-Soviet ears this audience's laughter could easily sound sacrilegious. The spectrum of political opinion that we expected to provoke was complemented from the outset of this research by the professional reactions of our Moscow colleagues for whom, at least initially, this project was matter out of place. Olga Sosnina is an art historian and I am an anthropologist. In the academic art-historical perspective, these "funny" and kitschy gift objects were emphatically not a subject for art history. But neither were they traditional ethnographic artifacts. Studying these, as well as gift relations with the state, was "not really ethnology."

In other words, it was clear that we would be attacked from all sides no matter what we did and that we would have no choice but argue our case academically, publicly, and politically all the way through. But it occurred to us that there was more to these conversations than a matter of scholarly and political pedagogy—of explaining our project to our various audiences. It became clear that the reactions, some anticipated and some not, would themselves be a part of the post-Soviet cultural condition and that the work on the exhibition could also be an ethnographic

means of exploring this condition. What kind of ethnography was it then? What kind of exchange were we charting, and in what kind of exchange were we involved? What did our project illuminate?

First, let me note that the range of these reactions is much broader. They include the decision of the Kremlin Museum to hold this exhibition (which was, and still is, exceptional for a museum that normally focuses on the tsarist period) and the decision of private sponsors to support it. In turn, we also took into account what the museum or sponsors were expecting in order to put forward a convincing case. Our project was therefore as much a reaction as a proposal. Then there were complex negotiations with artists whom we commissioned to design the exhibition space and with other museums for object loans; there were managerial negotiations and clarifications, never purely technical. All these decisions, negotiations, reactions, and counterreactions contained views of Soviet socialism; all were continuous with the exchange of opinion in the exhibition visitors' book and the media; and all parties involved were working out their own postsocialism through these reactions and decisions.

Second, perhaps because our research and exhibition was on gift relations with the state, we could not help noticing that by submitting the exhibition proposal to the Kremlin Museum and by helping its public relations office to contact potential exhibition sponsors *we were giving gifts and eliciting gifts*. This made us sensitive to how this exhibition mimicked its topic—the gift—and how our research conceptualization of Soviet-era gifts mimicked this post-Soviet context.

This mimesis came across to us very strongly when the administration of the Kremlin Museum decided to gift a copy of the exhibition catalog to President Putin for his fifty-fifth birthday in 2007. This gift was also a *reaction* to our project and also unanticipated by us. But this was just one striking instance in which we found the logic of the gift that we explored meandering out of our research and coming full circle into complex gift relations with the state in which we were involved as both researchers and curators. Artistic and research creativity is a gift (both in the sense of “talent” and product of creativity); museums create public gifts of their exhibitions and collections; the state often is the most prominent patron (gift giver) for these; yet most state exhibitions today are made possible also by generous support from private sponsors (see Cummings and Lewandowska 2001, 2007; and Maraniello, Risaliti, and Somain 2001 on exhibition experiments on the theme of such gift/commodity). In this particular case, however, sponsoring a *Kremlin* Museum project was as much a gift to sponsors as it was to the museum. Patronage of arts at “the state museum number one” by influential business interests may be a hint of proximity of these interests to the government.

What follows below is an ethnography of a recursive sequence of givers and recipients that starts from the gift politics of this exhibition and ends with the gift of socialism that, according to some comments of exhibition visitors, was forcibly taken away from them by postsocialism. My goal is to demonstrate how relations of knowledge, which configure this complex post-Soviet audience in the form of social memory, perform the gift and, vice versa, how gift giving performs these relations of

knowledge. But it is also to draw attention to the method of this exploration, which is itself performative in the sense proposed by Austin (1962): this is an ethnography that does things as well as saying them (Ssorin-Chaikov, introduction, this issue). In other words, this relational sequence of givers and recipients is not something “out there” to be explored, in relation to which we are merely academic outsiders. By doing this exhibition, by reflecting on these reactions, and by negotiating a complex museum and research space, we took part in it. Thus, this article contributes not just to the gift theory but also to anthropological understandings of performativity. This contribution will be summed up in the conclusion.

THE POLITICS OF LOCATION

At the opening of *Gifts to Soviet Leaders* in the prestigious Novyi Manezh hall, the Kremlin Museum director Elena Gagarina spoke of it as a symbol of a new kind of openness. For the first time, the gates of the Kremlin Museum opened not to let visitors in but to take an exhibition out—to *give* it to the Muscovites, but *in the city* and not inside the fortress walls of the Kremlin.

What was at stake in the Kremlin Museum’s decision to hold this exhibition not in its own museum space in the Kremlin but in a “good location” (*khoroshaia ploshchadka*) outside the Kremlin walls? What are the political rhythms in this artful gesture of choice of location, which was “not too close and not too far” from the Kremlin? As the director put this in terms of *giving* it to Moscow by opening the gates of the Kremlin and taking the exhibition out to Moscow, this gesture resembles the temporality of gift giving in that it needs to occur not too early and not too late (Bourdieu 1991; Ssorin-Chaikov 2000, 2006) but which in this case happens in space rather than time. Following Bourdieu (1991), one may argue that these politics of location cover up (“misrecognize”) the complexity of calculation that comes into the act of giving. But “misrecognition” as a concept is linked too much with Erving Goffman’s (1956) “dramaturgical” approaches to performativity and with the Marxist concept of “false consciousness.” It euphemistically puts something in terms of something else, while retaining the deep truth of the inner self or nature underneath the façade of the performance. Contrary to this, I argue this gift of the exhibition “remediates” (Rabinow 2008; Ssorin-Chaikov, introduction, this issue) politics, that is, transfers it from one kind of media to another, rather than euphemizing it. The gift of the exhibition produces new configurations of gift/politics and a new assemblage of the Kremlin/Museum. The *Gifts to Soviet Leaders* exhibition *performed* these Kremlin/Museum connections and, as a performance, it *described* these complex gift/politics of location.

Part of the logic of this decision was to minimize and control the inevitable association of this exhibition as project and the Kremlin as a place and as a center of power in Russia. This association was so obvious that many colleagues would approach Olga and me with a line that sounded like a question but was more of an affirmation: “So, this is what the Kremlin wants to do now?” This was not merely because the Kremlin Museum as an institution was always a mirror image of Russian centralized

rule. The government's political strategy in the early 2000s was to seize the Soviet and imperial legacy from the monopolistic hold of the then popular Communist Party. This generated a demand for cultural production. In this sense, the *Gifts to Soviet Leaders* project describes a time when Russian museums witnessed a proliferation of memorial exhibitions about Russian tsars, when Russian TV produced endless dramas on Soviet themes with a prominent role for Stalin, and when the Russian government cultivated a strong neo-Soviet identity centered on the figure of President Putin. The cultural sector in turn used this demand to reestablish links with the state and state funding, which were almost completely lost in the 1990s, a particularly impoverished decade for cultural institutions.

Unlike other media, the Kremlin Museum did not have to use this opportunity to gain a connection with the Kremlin. For the museum, this connection was a given. Throughout the post-Soviet period, this museum retained its materially and culturally privileged position of being "the state museum number one" in Russia. This was partly why other museums, which had their own, often considerable collections of gifts to Soviet leaders, agreed to participate in this exhibition, rather than quickly mounting their own shows once word of this "excellent idea for a project" started to spread. But precisely because this *Kremlin* connection was a given, the *Kremlin Museum's* task was not to devalue it by being "cheaply" neo-Soviet. To distance itself from this political line and the associated cultural sector bandwagon by taking the exhibition outside the Kremlin was a clever move.

Conveniently, there was an apparent lack of space in the Kremlin Museum itself. Outside the permanent display in the Kremlin Armory, its exhibition site is limited to the very compact basement of Ivan the Great's Bell Tower, which was too small for all the objects we wanted to assemble. Among the sites that were considered but rejected were the huge Central Artists House (TsDKh)—"Moscow's exhibition belly," as it is often referred to in museum circles in the sense of being a good place to bury a project—and museums that had large collections of similar gifts, such as the State History Museum or the former Revolution Museum, but those could project their own museum identity on this exhibition. The problem was to find the right spatial distance: not in the Kremlin, but not too far from it; at a distance from the Kremlin as a center of political authority but retaining the intellectual "brand" of the Kremlin over the exhibition concept; to have numerous collaborators, but not to dissolve the project in yet another *sbornaia solianka* or "motley crew" exhibition with a Soviet theme.

Novyi Manezh hall was ideal for this purpose. Large and prestigious enough, it was purely an exhibition hall that could be rented and therefore did not have its own strong museum identity. It was located just outside the Duma, the Russian parliament, but as a museum it had municipal rather than federal subordination. Connections with Moscow municipality were mobilized, and mayor Iurii Luzhkov's office confirmed, albeit after a long while—in a politically well-tempered pause—that we could use the space and, moreover, use it rent-free. The gift of the Kremlin Museum exhibition, with which it "finally" came out to the city, was enabled by another gift from Moscow to the Kremlin. But in the Russian political and museum hierarchy, this support, as

well as the sponsorship of the exhibition and catalog by the largest Russian investment consortium, AFK Sistema, was more of a gift to the giver than the receiver. Yet, the possibility of upsetting this hierarchy was still in the air when, during the exhibition opening, the Kremlin Museum staff were a little nervous: “what happens if [Mayor] Luzhkov shows up?” He wisely did not, and neither, equally wisely, did representatives of Putin’s government. The museum was the king of the hill. The opening was solely our reign.

CHRONOTOPE OF KNOWLEDGE

The “we” of the previous sentence highlights that the museum in this instance was a complex and composite figure. The right distance—“not too far, not too close to the Kremlin”—that I outlined above was not just the museum’s but also Olga Sosnina’s and mine, and was not just gift/political but also academic. The key textual annotation that prefaced the exhibition and its catalog opened with the line: “This exhibition offers a unique opportunity to explore the Soviet worldview without either exonerating or indicting it” (Sosnina and Ssorin-Chaikov 2006:1). By the time this phrase appeared in this preface, it had already had a long life. The preface was composed with comments that were rewritten, edited, or sometimes simply pasted—comments and notes that Sosnina and I made from the start of our work on this project. (“We” here is Olga and I, excluding the museum.) These included statements of what we did not want to do: “this is *not* a remake of ideological exhibitions of the Soviet era,” we wrote; “this is *not* about biography of Soviet leaders”; “we do *not* want to either marvel at these objects or denounce them as aesthetically false or laugh at them as a strange curiosity.” For the exhibition and catalog preface we edited these “negations” out as much as we could. We thought of them as conceptually important, but “the audience,” as the catalog publisher kept insisting, “will find it irrelevant; what they want is a positive attitude [*pozitivchik nuzhen!*]”

The idea of the Soviet chronotope was that *pozitivchik*. We argued that gifts to Soviet leaders envisioned Soviet socialism as “the new world” in the unity of the “new” (time) and the “world” (space):

These gifts ... project a uniquely Soviet vision of the world as an historical crossroad of the “bourgeois” past and the universal “communist” future. This temporal vision defined, in turn, meanings of space: who in that world was politically near and who was distant; and what distinguished “friends” from “foes” and “us” from “them.” They offer a map of symbolic markers of this “new world,” as it imagined itself in a cultural unity of time and space (the “new” and the “world”)—what we call here the Soviet chronotope. (Sosnina and Ssorin-Chaikov 2006:1)

Bakhtin’s notion of the “chronotope” was central to our conceptualization of the exhibition display, which we conceived as showing different Soviet-style categorizations of time and space. But the “negations” of our approach formed another chronotope. Exploration rather than judgment is a particular form of distancing—political and

ethical, spatial and temporal. This was a chronotope of neutrality of modern science and research curatorial projects. In the early 2000s, being academically *outside* the Soviet system was a condition for being truly *inside* the Soviet reality that was being explored. But this temporal distance was problematized by the proximity of this project to the Kremlin and the political agendas of Putin's government, which I outlined above, by new searches for national identity that pervaded Russian historiography of that time, and, equally importantly, by knowledge hierarchies between Western and Russian academic institutions. Therefore we all knew well that there was nothing neutral about our distancing. ("We" here includes Olga, myself, and our Kremlin colleagues.) But to state this explicitly was, ironically, to erase the difference between our project and the Soviet society in which everything was political, and officially so. A widely spread Western anthropological view that politics and power is everywhere in this sense is much more socialist than postsocialist. The composite "we" of this project operated through the aesthetics of the constitutive limit of the political (Rancière 2004).

I already mentioned "we" as in Sosnina and myself and the Kremlin Museum, and "we" as Olga and me without it. But even for Olga and me, the goal of this project "to explore the Soviet worldview without either exonerating or indicting it" worked differently given the interdisciplinary and international character of our collaboration. Olga was much more closely engaged in Moscow museum politics than I was. I thought it was interesting to do something experimental in a simultaneously highly politicized and depoliticized museum milieu. But this experimentation was my own way of distancing. I did not have to fully live with the consequences. For Olga, the complex politics was not so much an experiment but the pragmatics of every curatorial project she was engaged in. Her motto was akin to Žižek's: "We know it [how politicized the effects of our actions can be] but do it nonetheless."

This constitutive limit of the political is relational. What came into this relationship in the context of our collaboration is primarily complex social and academic space between the history of art and anthropology, and between the Kremlin Museum and Cambridge University—the space that we ourselves jokingly described with the hybrid term "Krembridge." The point of this juxtaposition was to highlight the connection and contrast between us as individual collaborators but also between institutions that each have their own elitist and Byzantine reputations and, taken together, mark the distinction between par excellence politics and research.

In the course of designing the exhibition we had to deal with other forms of distancing. Let us move from the spatial and political configuration of Kremlin–Cambridge–Novyi Manezh inside the space of the Novyi Manezh. Its building comprises two halls, one to the left and one to the right from the entry area. We decided to use them to illustrate the categorizations of space and time respectively (Figure 3). The hall on space provided a keynote to the exhibition as it was marked for the viewers as the "entry to display" (*nachalo osmotra*).

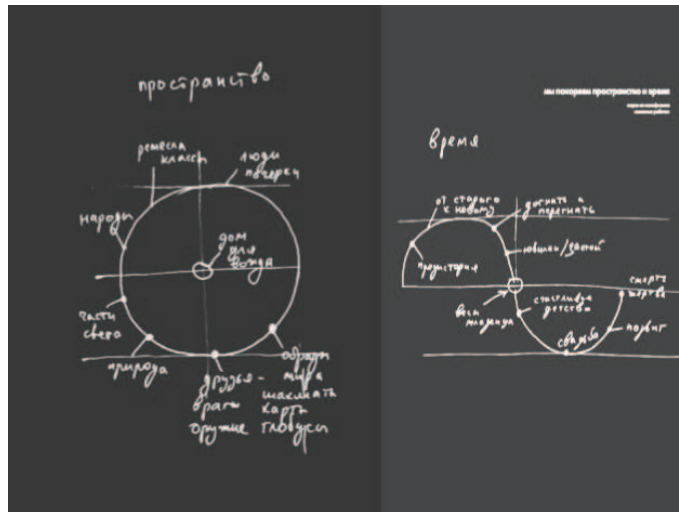


Figure 3. Halls of space and time, *Gifts to Soviet Leaders* exhibition plan; drawing by Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (2006b:9–10).

A well-known Moscow architect and “a child of Khrushchev’s Thaw” Evgenii As initially proposed a vision of this hall as consisting of a high and “faceless” Kremlin wall, with gift offerings placed in front of it. On the original sketch of the exhibition plan this was a place for “Demos,” marked by dots of touring visitors and gifts, separated by the impenetrable wall from place for “Power.” “It’s Moloch again,” instantly reacted Olga when she saw the sketch. Moloch is a Biblical being who demanded children as sacrifices and whose name film director Aleksandr Sokurov used as the title of his movie about Hitler (1999), which opens his cinematic “tetralogy” on power.² For Olga, “Moloch” was a quick way to evoke the totalitarian approach in art, and for both of us this approach was a particular way to distance this project as the “other” to the Soviet reality that it described. Conceptually we did not agree with the analytics of this approach—in particular, with its binary separation of “the people” and “power.” When we commissioned this project we carefully explained to the designers of Evgenii’s studio that our take on power was Foucauldian rather than totalitarian and that the whole point of approaching it through the lens of gift giving was to break up such binaries. Evgenii’s proposal was a response to our concept, and it was in complete contradiction to our view.

We proposed instead the idea of Foucault’s Panopticon and suggested building its entire panorama out of gifts. The outer circle of the Panopticon used different gifts to demarcate a panoramic “World for the Leader” that was brought to view him from the central point, which we called the “House of the Leader,” also composed of gifts. The “world” symbolized the figure of the giver, and the “house” the figure of

² Followed by *Taurus* (2001) about Lenin, *The Sun* (2005) about Japanese Emperor Hirohito, and *Faustus* (2011).

the receiver. In doing so, we supplemented the Foucauldian “power/knowledge” nexus with that of gift relations.

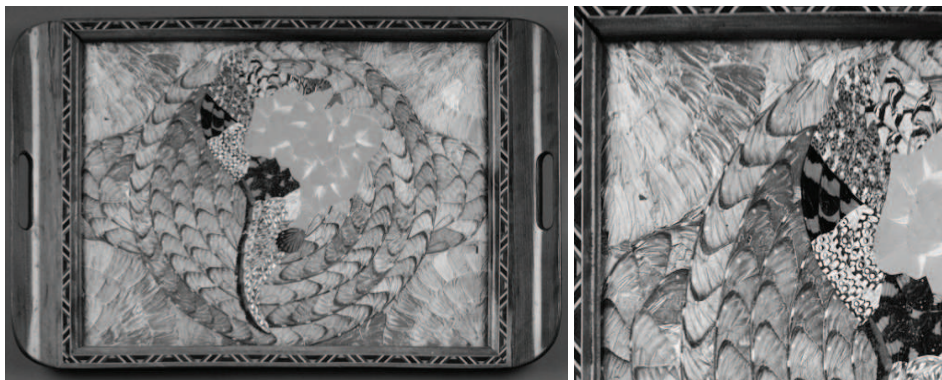


Figure 4. Tray with the map of Latin America made of butterfly wings. A gift to I. V. Stalin for his seventieth birthday from Brazilian workers. Butterfly wings, wood, and glass; collage; courtesy of State Central Museum of Contemporary History of Russia, Moscow.

But since we wanted, almost as conceptual artists, to engage “the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions” (LeWitt 1967:84), we deliberately left unresolved the problem that many of the gifts could be placed in both locations. One example of this is a tea tray that depicted a map of Latin America. Made of butterfly wings, it was presented as a birthday gift to Stalin from Brazilian workers in 1949 (Figure 4). This tray was one way to imagine the world of the gift giver, and therefore it ended up in the “World for the Leader” part of the display. But as a tea tray, it could have been in the “House of the Leader.” This representation of a geographical part of the world was on an object of possible domestic use, which was ideally within arm’s reach of Stalin. The location of such gifts in the exhibition display brought into view the arbitrariness of our decision to place it in the leader’s “world” rather than his “house.” This, in turn, conveyed our conceptual point that the gifts stand for the figures of both giver and receiver—and, in the case of the Brazilian tea tray, for the symmetry of Soviet imperialism that could be imagined as seizing the whole world, including Brazil, from Stalin’s “home” in the Kremlin, and the expansionism of the gift givers who invade, with the gifts that are parts of themselves, the domestic worlds of world leaders far away. Foucault’s Panopticon is a good device to think about power/knowledge relations: you do not necessarily see yourself being observed, but you *know* that you may be at any point; thus relations of power take the form of relations of knowledge (Foucault 1977:304–305). Here, a panoptic display of gifts distributes in the thoughts of the viewers the figures of giver and receiver—transforming gift relations into knowledge relations.

Evgenii As went along with these ideas. But the perspectives that we collectively assembled could have been interpreted in very different ways by viewers or even by Evgenii as the designer. A *given* panoptic perspective could be *taken* as Moloch. After all, objects for the leader’s domestic use, such as the tea tray or smoking pipes or

armchairs or gramophones, were standing *for* the figure of the leader rather than actually making this figure visible. They conveyed well the Foucauldian point about power as something that one knows rather than sees. But as this perspective worked through the notion of invisibility, it could be easily taken to be a mere extension of the image of the faceless and impenetrable Kremlin wall.

It follows, then, that Moloch could be a remediation of the Panopticon. The two were not opposing perspectives on power that pushed the viewer to “progress” from the first to the second but equally possible conclusions that one could deduce from the material. At the exhibition opening, both Olga Sosnina and I were interviewed by a Radio Liberty journalist. The review, which aired the same night, started with a reminiscence of Irina Antonova, the director of the Pushkin Museum, the main Moscow collection of Western fine arts. She recalled how, in 1949, this fine arts collection was squeezed out of its space by an exhibition of gifts to Stalin for his seventieth birthday. The journalist went on to say that in recent years it seemed that such horrible things belonged to the past. “But this only seems so.” The Kremlin Museum unveiled the show of such gifts, “‘out of pure anthropological interest,’ as the exhibition curators insist.” The tone of this report is that of suspicion about the intentions behind this exhibition. “As Olga Sosnina emphasizes, the task of the exhibition was to reflect not Soviet reality but Soviet mythology”:

Well, it did not work out like that. The design of the exhibition space, the items that are exhibited with care no matter if these are indeed precious objects, such as a sabre ornamented with emeralds or [not precious at all like] a slanting ink set ornamented with beads that one disabled woman made with her toes ... [All this] is full of pathos. Even industrially made measuring scales for newborn babies are full of pathos ... Imperial style in all its beauty! (Pal’veleva 2006)

Here it is not merely that the exhibited gifts illustrate the Moloch of Soviet power, but the exhibition itself appears as one of Moloch’s organs. Without seeing Evgenii As’s original sketch of the exhibition space, this report easily arrived at a vision of the anonymous Kremlin wall and the gift offerings placed in front of it. But this image refers not to the concept of power that the exhibition conveyed but to the exhibition itself in Western media, such as this report of the *Sunday Telegraph*: “Sent with warm greetings from some of last century’s most cold-blooded rulers, they are not mementoes that many would choose to cherish. Now though, after decades of hiding them from the public eye, the Kremlin has finally unveiled the gifts that Soviet-era rulers received from admirers round the world” (Womack and Harper 2006).

Unsurprisingly, these reports do not merely point out the neo-Soviet features of post-Soviet politics and culture but also link them with empire (“Imperial style in all its beauty”). The aesthetics of these reports zoom out of the exhibition display to an imagined series of recursive spaces: “Gift Exhibition–Kremlin–Moscow–Soviet Union–Russian Empire.” The title of the Radio Liberty report is “Gifts to Soviet Leaders: An Anthropological Interest in the Imperial Style.” The display “follows Hegel, but was amended with Lévi-Strauss,” as newspaper *Novaia gazeta* put it (Kvasok

2006). To anthropologize this space/time was precisely to give it a cultural legitimacy that Hegelian and Marxist narratives no longer have, if they ever had it, for Radio Liberty and the *Sunday Telegraph*.

In this case, such a line of both spatial and temporal connections was drawn from a distance. The connections appear from the “outside” of the neoliberal perspective, they follow the totalitarian approach to Soviet history, and they cast anthropological perspectives on Soviet society as pro-Soviet. Interestingly, the same line of connections is also drawn from a different perspective and for different reasons. “You can make a [permanent] museum from this exhibition,” noted one of the visitors. “After all, the [Kremlin] Armory is also a museum of gifts.” The Kremlin Museum director, in her opening speech at the exhibition opening and in the preface to the exhibition catalog, reiterated a similar link:

Museum of the Moscow Kremlin holds historic collections of the Armory, a significant part of which is gifts to Russian tsars and emperors from foreign and Russian subjects. It is much less well known that our museums also have gifts that were presented to Soviet political leaders. While the diplomatic gifts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were exhibited on numerous occasions, [gift] traditions of the twentieth century remain unexplored. We hope that our exhibition will fill this gap. (Gagarina 2006:5)

One of the intended audiences of these remarks was the milieu of art historians and museum curators, for whom projects about the Soviet period were still illegitimate. The Soviet ideology contaminated the notions of “pure art” and “real historiography.” As some visitors put it in their comments, “I do not think that this is what is worth reminding the people of, I do not think that this is beautiful art”; “We do not think the exhibition was worth having. Because its exhibits reveal, however partially, absolutely primitive character and a spiritual poverty [*dukhovnuu ushcherbnost'*] of our recent elite.” In order to make this exhibition a legitimate topic, one had to argue that the Soviet era was not a violent interruption but a continuation of the *longue durée* of Russian imperial history—in other words, to make a similar recursion “Gift Exhibition—Kremlin—Moscow—Soviet Union—Russian Empire.”

But in this recursive space there is a certain point that does not merely extend time but also collapses it in a particular temporal moment. Too often our colleagues, including Western ones, would introduce Olga or me by saying, “This is who made the fascinating exhibition of gifts to Stalin.” This was despite our multiple and (we thought) clear explanations that the exhibition was about gifts to *all* Soviet leaders, from Vladimir Lenin to Mikhail Gorbachev. In other words, this semantic space simultaneously orientalizes Russia as timeless imperial entity and condenses this timelessness in the figure of Stalin. In this timelessness of Russia all dictators meet: “Is this true that you have a saber given by Saddam Hussein to Stalin?” one journalist at the exhibition opening asked.

TAKING AWAY THE GIFT OF SOCIALISM

If for the Kremlin Museum, exhibition designers, and journalistic commentators one of the central concerns was the unavoidable *proximity* of this project to the Soviet past, what the visitors remarked on in their comments was the unbridgeable *distance* from it. As one visitor put it,

Once I walked out of the museum to the street, I became very sad, very sad that this all does not exist any more. Only now I understand that what is most important in life is not money but relations between human beings.³

Postsocialism is identified here as the world of money, and socialism as “relations between human beings.” From this distance, Soviet socialism appears human and, as I show below, turns into a gift. I submit that in the form of these comments, the exhibition *performed* the gift of socialism. I will argue that this performance could be characterized as socialist realism in reverse: the temporal projection of its utopian social order, but to the past and not to the imminent future, as in classic socialist realist art.

Noting “the modesty of the gifts [on display] from the material perspective,” one of the visitors launched a lengthy discussion of gifts to contemporary politicians. “Particularly in contrast with what was stolen from Slizka!” This is a reference to a robbery of the home of Liubov’ Slizka, vice speaker of the Russian parliament, which revealed that she was much richer than she officially declared. Her robbed safe allegedly contained diamonds and other gifts worth about \$500,000. This story had been discussed in the media earlier that year and made it into several visitors’ comments: “Everything exhibited here is a reflection of genuine feelings of respect for the leaders. But for what services did the contemporary leader Slizka receive her gold and diamonds! Shame! She, the scrounger, needs not to be robbed but executed by firing squad!” The commenter contrasts Slizka with the modesty of the leaders of the past and also with “the rule” that the Soviet leaders followed, according to the visitors, wherein they received all gifts no matter how modest or precious. They “submitted the received gifts [to the state]—this is an international rule.” In contrast, “Slizka, who was robbed of gifts and offerings to an official person on the sum of half a million dollars, was able to hide all this and still remains in her present post so that she can collect new bribes.”⁴

This and other commentary about gifts to Soviet leaders was framed by an understanding of postsocialism as essentially a form of robbery of the public of what many took for granted under Soviet socialism. The visitor concludes: “It is shame to live like this in a country where everything is stolen and where people live behind iron [fortified] doors and die at the rate of one million people a year.”⁵

³ *Kniga otzyvov vystavki “Dary vozhdiam,”* November 22, 2006.

⁴ *Kniga otzyvov vystavki “Dary vozhdiam,”* November 5, 2006.

⁵ *Kniga otzyvov vystavki “Dary vozhdiam,”* November 19, 2006.

WHEN WAS THE GIFT OF SOCIALISM MADE?

If the hall on space was the conceptual keynote of the exhibition, the area by the exhibition exit where we placed the visitors' book constituted its conclusion. There, we also posted a note with our contact details and invited reflections, comments, criticism, and memories. Our goal in this section was to create a juxtaposition of this project's audience and Soviet-era audiences of exhibitions of such gifts. We deliberately made this area for reflection adjacent to a video installation showing original documentary footage of visitors to Soviet-era exhibitions of gifts to Soviet leaders.⁶ Our intention was to make the viewers reflect on the differences between themselves and the Soviet public that was an occasional viewer of gifts to Soviet leaders but also, more importantly, their frequent *giver*. But this role of the public as a giver remained virtually unreflected in the commentary that we received in return. Instead, visitors of the Soviet generation frequently and extensively emphasized their role as *receivers* from the state:

I am 76 years old. Before the Revolution, my grandfather was a street cleaner, and my grandmother was a laundress. My mother was a bookkeeper. [But] I had a long and fulfilling life. I am a second generation Leningrader. [I lived through the] Leningrad blockade [of the Second World War], was wounded, and evacuated to Kuban'.

The exhibition has shown all that the Soviet power gave to my generation. I started my working life at the age of 14, and finished at 60 when I retired. I have two higher education degrees, and I received both without leaving production work. I started my career as a plumber apprentice and finished as a project construction engineer. This all thanks to the Soviet power.

This is a wonderful exhibition! Having walked through it, I [feel] as if [I] walked again through my entire life that I consider to be a happy one.

Thank you very much!

This is a good exhibition.

[It is] as if [I] returned to my childhood. It was not all that bad...⁷

If our curatorial intention was to display gifts to Soviet leaders and the Soviet public as a giver, what these people saw—and commented on—was socialism as a gift that they had received. Visitors did not merely highlight that “the Soviet times were the fairest in the social respect” but also that this “fairness” is what “the Soviet power gave to my generation” in sharp contrast to what had been taken away recently. During Soviet times, “people started *receiving* jobs,” while “now there is unemployment in the country”; “we *received* free education,” “we *received* stipends and free lunches,” “the state *was giving* us the opportunity to implement Lenin’s slogan, ‘Study, study and, one more time, study,’” while “now education and healthcare are not free.”⁸

⁶ Video installations included footage of the Soviet news coverage of the exhibition of gifts to Stalin in 1949–1953 and of gift exhibitions at Soviet Communist Party congresses in 1930, 1937, and 1982.

⁷ *Kniga otzyvov vystavki “Dary vozhdiam,”* November 4, 2006.

⁸ *Kniga otzyvov vystavki “Dary vozhdiam,”* November 12, 15, and 19, 2006, emphases added.

But the fact that something is given does not necessarily make it a gift. The idiom of “receiving” jobs, education, housing, commodities, and so on, comes from the vocabulary of the state-socialist “rational redistribution” (Kornai 1980), which also included “handing out” by the state, “getting” goods from it, or “submitting” produce to it. This was a system of centralized allocation of resources that worked on principles different from those of the market, with its vocabulary of purchase and credit. For my argument here it is essential to note that this economy is itself performative in relation to the market. It matters little how true, if at all, this memory was with reference to the Soviet past: that is, how moral or fair state-socialist redistribution was in general or how pleasant the audience’s memories of Brezhnev’s era of relative stability and wealth, which often is assumed to be the sociohistorical source of these memories. The point of these memories is to perform a particular view of the market: “Only now I understand that what is most important in life is not money but relations between human beings.”⁹

What strikes me in these comments is their resemblance to Soviet-era descriptions of what Soviet life should be. They are not realistic in the sense of sociological or historical realism or realistic fiction, but in the sense of socialist realism. This was an official artistic doctrine in the Soviet Union that was established in the early 1930s. Its aesthetics was based on the depiction of reality “in its revolutionary development,” that is, for instance, showing not merely how impoverished everyday life was in the early years of the Soviet Union but also that it will become better. This is a description of the present from the point of the view of the “seeds” of the progressive future.

This substitution of socialism as it ideally should be for what it actually was can be viewed as “propaganda.” But such an interpretation overlooks the self-consciously teleological character of Soviet art, a temporal orientation that approached the present from the point of view of the future. I submit that the idiom of giving was similarly teleological. The principle “From each according to his ability; to each according to his need” that was shared in Soviet-type societies and in social democracies was never a description of what existed, but a programmatic indication of what should exist.

If in visitors’ comments this notion was retrospective, and if its view of the obligation to give is predicated on a post-Soviet forceful taking away, the socialist realist perspective is a promise of the future. Its temporal horizon is long-term and teleological, with the present defined in terms of lack. In this future orientation, the teleological end of the redistributive economy is a gift. Communism appears as a social horn of plenty, the world tree that yields all possible fruit—as some of the gifts to Soviet leaders indicate (cf. Figure 5 of corn in the form of the mythical world tree, or horn of plenty). Visitors’ comments reflect these temporal inversions of the future as socialist realism with reference to the past as a moral economy. Socialism as “receiving jobs,” “receiving free education,” “receiving stipends and free lunches”¹⁰ is socialist realism in reverse. Socialist realist social memory in this sense “remembers

⁹ *Kniga otzyvov vystavki “Dary vozhdiam,”* November 22, 2006.

¹⁰ *Kniga otzyvov vystavki “Dary vozhdiam,”* November 12 and 19, 2006, emphases added.

the future.” It is not merely a discourse on loss (cf. Boym 2002; Oushakine 2009) but on the loss of modernity’s teleological orientation (Guyer 2007).



Figure 5. Panel “Corn Feeds Everyone.” A gift to N. S. Khrushchev from Wilhelmshorst arts and crafts group, Potsdam region, German Democratic Republic, 1960s. “ALLES FRISST MAIS / Zirkel für bildnerisches Volksschaffen Wilhelmshorst / Bezirk Potsdam” (Corn feeds all / people’s arts and crafts group Wilhelmshorst / Potsdam region); batik on silk, wood; 124 x 79 cm; courtesy of State Museum-Exhibition Center (ROSIZO), Moscow.

THE SOCIALIST REALISM OF THE GIFT

But my argument about socialist realist memory is also applicable to the gifts themselves. In the late 1930s, a similar idiom of “receiving jobs” and “the state ... *giving* us the opportunity to implement Lenin’s slogan, ‘study, study and, one more time, study,’”¹¹ was a key motif in gift giving to Stalin and other state leaders. These gifts expressed gratitude for the state’s offerings. They were counter-gifts for the gift of socialism, thanking the state and Stalin for “for our happy childhood” and “happy life.” This gratitude was instigated by Stalin’s speech at the 1935 conference of Stakhanovites in which he stated that “life has become better, comrades, life has become more joyous,” and by the 1936 Soviet Constitution that declared socialism in the USSR a reality that had been “basically” (*v osnovnom*) achieved. This was an example of socialist realism in politics, rather than in the arts, but it had a similar teleological temporality of substitution of life as it should be for what life was in the late 1930s.

But let me note once again that declaring something given does not make it a gift. While the Party and Soviet documents were keen to stress their role as “leading”

¹¹ *Kniga otzyvov vystavki “Dary vozhdiam,”* November 12, 15, and 19, 2006, emphases added.

and “guiding” the country to communist happiness, they actually never described themselves as “bearing gifts.” It was these gifts to Soviet leaders as gifts of gratitude that called the role of the Party and the leader a gift. These counter-gifts postulated socialism as the original gift, and this happened within the socialist realist aesthetics of Soviet politics itself. The temporality of this gift is not merely present but present perfect. Moreover, these counter-gifts are actually a first gift that constructs the whole chain of symbolic exchanges in which socialism appears in gift form (Ssorin-Chaikov 2006a).

The postsocialist commentary of exhibition visitors follows a similar retrospective logic. These comments themselves form a complex and nonlinear chain of retrospections. This is the present—as time and gift—that is deferred backwards to the future-oriented socialist chronotope. But this is itself in exchange for the vision of the post-Soviet present, in which a gift is a corrupt bribe.

We arrive at a point at which the specificity of the gift situation can be situated in gift theory. My conclusion that the gift is always/already a response takes us back to Marcel Mauss’s ([1925] 1990) observation that gifts seem voluntary but are in fact obligatory and that they condense a triple unity of obligations: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. But this does not make the gifts that I explore here cases of the archetypal Maussian gift. Rather, it is the other way around: these gift relations situate Mauss. I approach a functional link between social obligations and gift not as a cultural and “archaic” universal but as articulating culturally specific modern and Euro-American assumptions about reciprocity (Parry 1986; Strathern 1988; Laidlaw 2000). The case that I have presented here is within the scope of this Euro-American modernity. This is not an “archaic” gift, and not merely a modern gift, but a socialist gift of modernity that envisions social obligations that are alternatives to the capitalist market. I submit that Maussian gift theory is indigenous to this socialist discourse on reciprocity.

What I would like to take issue with here is thus not with *where* this functional link between social obligations and gifts happens, but with *how*. If the obligations to give, to receive, and to reciprocate appear as a triple unity, and in particular if giving is already an obligation, sociality can be said to exist prior to the gift and to actually explain it. But to argue the converse, that gifts explain sociality, is to break down this triple unity into a sequence “to give—to receive—to reciprocate” and locate obligation in the final link of this chain. Of course, in gift theory these relationships form a circle in which the end is the beginning and all parts are substitutable: “to give = to receive = to reciprocate.” But to the extent that this argument can be used to explain how gifts create sociality, it depends on the assumption that there is more obligation to receive, and even more to reciprocate, than in the first act of giving.

In a hypothetical world of this creation, the first gift is actually free, as the obligation that it creates is not yet there. Here, in the midst of a Durkheimian perspective, we see a Hobbesian free will (this first gift may come out of recognition of necessity but not out of obligation) and also a Hobbesian state of nature before this first gift is made: before the world with no social obligations is transformed into one which is built around the notion of reciprocity. Marshal Sahlins spotted this

implicit presence of Hobbes in Mauss in the implication of Mauss's remarks that to refuse to take part in gift exchange is tantamount to a declaration of war. This Hobbsian state of "warre" does not exist but "has to be imagined" as a threat of violence that reinforces sociality (Sahlins 1972:172–174).

Of course, such origins of sociality are difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate. This would require either an evolutionary account of the beginnings of society as such, or at least of some broken-down sociality that was restored or put together differently through gift giving. But this approach also assumes a linear historical time that goes from "the state of nature" to "society," with the vector of this transformation going through another linear sequence of a gift that is followed by a counter-gift. And it is precisely this sequence that appears problematic in light of what I have explored in this article. Here, the counter-gift seems to be the first gift. And it is not that if there had been no original gift that triggered reciprocity, it would have to have been invented. The original gift actually *is* invented by the idiom of gifts to Soviet leaders as counter-gifts that name the whole sequence of exchange. The temporal logic of obligation here is not linear (cf. Ssorin-Chaikov 2006a). It does not unfold from the past to the present, from gift to reciprocation, but moves the opposite way, from the present to the past, constituting the original gift of socialism by means of response. To put this differently, this gift is a *social* memory device that creates and naturalizes a narrative of past relations—and a *socialist realist* memory devices create a teleological orientation to the present. It constructs socialism as a gift and as a mere given.

PERFORMATIVITY

So far I have established an analogy of some of the responses to the exhibition and gifts to Soviet leaders in construction of the gift of socialism. But this analogy can be extended to the temporality of these responses more generally. It seems that the exhibition was a "proposal" and viewers' responses were a "reaction." But if we break this "proposal" down into all the decisions that made it happen, it is actually very difficult to find an initial proposal that was not already in some way a reaction. In these chains of exchange, of actions and reactions, it is impossible to find the original action prior to which there was no exchange—an action that is not like the gift that I just discussed and that is not always/already a response.

Let me come back to the point with which I began this article, where I argued that this breaks down the author/audience distinction. My point was that this links *Gifts to Soviet Leaders* with conceptual art by way of merging artwork and commentary on artwork and of locating the artistic act not in the author's intention but in the audience's response. I suggested that the whole exhibition, with all intellectual, curatorial, and managerial decisions, politics, and compromises, can be seen as a conceptualist and composite portrait of this audience/author—a conceptualist depiction of how this project is situated. As a study of ethnographic conceptualism, this is "not 'Ethnography' in itself but a means of creating it" (Ssorin-Chaikov, introduction, this issue, 9). I will argue now that this author/audience and proposal/

reaction distinction also collapses—and allows to revisit from a new angle—a central relationship that I explore in this article: the relationship between what *Gifts to Soviet Leaders* describes (Soviet socialism) and what it performs (postsocialism). The concluding sections highlight what this contributes to theories of performativity.

“Performativity” juxtaposes two meanings of the verb “to perform”: to enact or represent, which implies a repetition of something else (a play or identity or the past being performed), and to work, function, or simply run, which normally describes what is *made* and what, or who, is set to accomplish a particular goal (an engine or a student performing well). It is this connotation of making that performativity as a theoretical concept opposes with performance as an enactment or representation of what exists. It refers to semiotic expression—linguistic or symbolic—that has extrasemiotic consequences, including constructing reality itself. Performativity is the “reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (Butler 1993:2). A chain of gifts where there is no “first gift” but always exchange and a chain of comments where there is no “first proposal” but always a response are analogous to performativity theory’s view of reiteration, in which there is no being or identity that is prior to it—performing as *forming* something rather than enacting it.

This approach stems from phenomenology, which seeks to explain how social agents constitute social reality and themselves through language, gesture, and symbol, and takes the rigor of its analytics from speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) in distinguishing “constative” (“representational”) and “performative” utterances. Constative speech acts are utterances like “it rains” that convey information and can be judged on the grounds of being true or not. In contrast, performative speech acts “do” things with words rather than “represent” them—it is the utterance “I do” at a wedding that makes a couple “man and wife.” Performative utterances can be successful or not, “happy” or “infelicitous” (Austin 1962:13–15), and many other things, but they cannot be said to be true or false.

But the radical thrust of performativity theory is in its skepticism about mere description. It starts from the distinction between the performative and the constative only to cast doubt on the latter and to render performative an ever-greater range of what seem to be constative matters of fact. When Donna Haraway reminded us that “fact” comes from the Latin root *facere*, “to do,” “to manufacture,” “to make,” and that “fact” shares this origin with what seems to be its complete opposite, “fiction” (1989:4–5), her point was not to state that fact is “in fact” fiction but to ask how facts are themselves manufactured and what is manufactured by facts in science and in society beyond science. The implication of this is that knowledge performs modernity (Butler 1988, 1990; Haraway 1988, 1989; Callon 1986; Latour 1993, 1999; Pickering 1995). It is not so much about what it describes but those who describe; it is not after what it refers to, but before it; and is not a repetition but a source.

But surely not everything is language? Doesn’t knowledge primarily work as it is supposed to—that is, by describing? And does the value of these descriptions still reside in how true or false they are? Such critiques of performativity may come from a realist point of view on knowledge and signification—as in the “science wars” of

the 1990s (Latour 1999)—but at any event they are about what performativity theory seeks to interpret: if the subject of knowledge and the signification are independently constituted.¹² What I would like to suggest here is a different line of critical engagement. What I would like to take issue with is not so much what performativity theory seeks to understand but its own status in this interpretation. I argue that when this theory renders knowledge essentially performative, it remains constative with reference to itself. Nothing is, from this point of view, simply a matter of a fact—except this very statement. The theory of performativity is a *description* of performativity. It is a constative utterance of what performativity is. The more total performativity is with reference to the world out there, the more descriptive it is with reference to itself.

When, in her famous and indeed foundational statement on the performativity of gender, Judith Butler argues that gender is not “true or false” but “is *made* to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control” (1988:528, emphasis added), the constative matter of fact that is implied by this performative perspective is, firstly, how gender is made to comply with these notions of truth and falsity and, secondly, how these notions serve social policies of gender regulation and control. Such descriptions can be judged on the basis of their accuracy, and they distinguish, in turn, more or less true approaches to performativity—for instance, Judith Butler (1988:528) on Erving Goffman (1956):

As opposed to a view such as Erving Goffman’s which posits a self which assumes and exchanges various “roles” within the complex social expectations of the “game” of modern life . . . I am suggesting that this self is not only irretrievably “outside,” constituted in social discourse, but that the ascription of interiority is itself a publicly regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrication. Genders, then, can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent.

Bruno Latour (1999) highlights something similar when he notes that the social constructivist approach to science replaces the truth about nature with the truth about society. My point is different: it is not merely that society is manufactured, or performed, in a similar way to how nature is. It is also that a description of this process of manufacturing replicates the constative view of knowledge and signification that performativity theory seeks to deconstruct. The argument that what seems constative is “in fact” performative does not quite make it into a “surface politics” (Butler 1990; Latour 1999, 2005) that put the scholar on the same ontological plane as the world that is the subject of reflection (Ssorin-Chaikov 2013).

This position generates constative statements in the manner of Karl Schmitt’s sovereign decision on what constitutes an exception. These are not “the constatives” that are categorically distinct from “the performatives.” They are part of performativity

¹² Interestingly, a similar disagreement is visible in the current vitalist challenge to performativity, whose proponents argue that the “independently constituted” matter is itself creative and materiality has agency and affect (Barad 2003; Bell 2007).

but exist in a peculiar space that enables it and simultaneously is situated beyond it. They form a vibrant field of “new empiricism” in anthropology after the 1980s. They are interlinked with Michel Foucault’s general move from philosophy to its history and from epistemology to the genealogy of epistemes—for example, with his performative restatement of Freud’s constative “repressive hypothesis” (Foucault 1980), namely, that the apparatus of knowledge about sexuality constitutes rather than describes it. Michel Callon too describes how the contemporary market economy is performed by economics (Callon 1997; Callon, Millo, and Muniesa 2007). Indeed, what I have offered in this article is a description of the performativity of *Gifts to Soviet Leaders*.

I identify the key analytical move of performativity theory not in the recasting the constative, a matter of fact, as performative, but relocating and redrawing the distinction between the two. What follows from this, for me, is that performativity theory operates at the limits of performativity and, furthermore, as its constitutive limit. But the “constitutive” means not only that it is foundational but also that it makes rather than describes. In other words, this constitutive limit is itself performative. I suggest viewing the “performative” not as a domain or a type of utterance that is distinct from the descriptive but as *drawing this distinction*.

REGIMES OF TRUTH AS VALUE REGIMES

The question of what is performed by description needs, therefore, to be complemented with the question of what is performed by drawing a distinction between the descriptive and the performative. I have demonstrated that the distinction between the constative and the performative performs a connection between academic knowledge and politics along the chain of givers and receivers. What I suggest is an implication of this—that this distinction is a *subject of exchange* and that the connection here that is being performed is an exchange relation. And most fundamentally, this is a relation. The performativity theorist is not located here as an omnipresent eye that simply and unobtrusively sees how facts are made. These relational positions are of giver and receiver. What can be given as a constative statement, can be taken as a performative, and the other way around. Regimes of truth, like “regimes of value” (Appadurai 1986), may differ for the giver and the receiver (Ssorin-Chaikov 2000). The moment of exchange establishes identity between “the constative = the performative”—what is “true or false” equals what is “successful or not,” “happy or infelicitous” (Austin 1962:13–15)—but this is only one moment in a continuous relation. As Marx famously put it, if grain is exchanged for iron, there is something common in both, and in the same proportion. In exchange, these two items are equivalent to one another. But if they really were equivalent, there would be no need for exchange. Equivalence is only a way to express and measure difference, which is not erased but maintained.

A *given* constative statement—the exhibition *Gifts to Soviet Leaders*—describes Soviet socialism through the lens of these gifts. This statement can be *taken* as such; or it can be *taken* performatively—as I did in the ethnographic sections of this

article. In my performative reading, this description of Soviet socialism configures postsocialism in Moscow. But this is in turn a description—and almost an objectification, which was noted by those exhibition visitors who remarked that the visitors' book of comments is as "interesting and educating" as the objects on display. Other commentators can take, in turn, this project as performing Putin's "vertical of power" by means of casting a cultural legitimacy on it. I have shown above that, for instance, a given Foucauldian approach to power can be taken as totalitarian both academically and politically: as a matter of discussion of how to understand Soviet order and as a matter of distancing from it or of reproducing it in the form of neo-Soviet or "quintessentially Russian" traditions of rule.

In other words, in this space of exchange, it is not just for me to draw a distinction between the constative and the performative. The distinction is flat rather than hierarchical (cf. Latour 2005). The visitors' comment book in this light is a polemic not merely about this exhibition being true or not as a description, or good or not as a performance, but also about if this is a description or a performance, in whose eyes, in what degree, and with what result. This interestingly merges with the issue of the exhibition's aesthetics. If this knowledge was descriptive, the manner in which it is presented and its aesthetics would be ultimately unimportant. It would not matter, for instance, if this had been a poorly designed exhibition—if the view of Soviet society that it conveyed was true and if this knowledge was not a repetition of what has been done before. If, on the contrary, this knowledge was performative, its value would then be in the efficacy of the performance rather than in the truth of its description. What mattered from this point of view was how, if at all, it resonated with existing opinions and if its aesthetics were powerful enough to create new opinions and thus influence the society in which this performance took place.

The focus on exchange does not replace the focus on discourse but offers a different way to approach it. If discourse is "an entity of sequences, of signs, in so far as they are statements" (Foucault 1972:121), the notion of exchange stresses a sequence. Latin *discursus*, "running to and from," highlights a change of direction—(ex)change as a sequence of proposals and responses, opinions, surprises, "no surprises," confirmations, and disagreements.

GIFT/KNOWLEDGE RELATIONS

This sequence of exchanges constitutes gift/knowledge relations along two nexus. Both follow an analogy between gifts as material objects that were on display and opinions of exhibition visitors. If conceptualism "dematerializes" art (Lippard and Chandler 1968; see Ssorin-Chaikov, introduction, this issue), I used it here to dematerialize the gift and to link it to Foucault's take on power as something that you know rather than see—to relations of power taking the form of relations of knowledge.

In the first nexus knowledge is a way to relate specifically to the socialist gift of modernity. But knowledge is also central to the socialist gift of modernity itself. Lenin's "study, study, and, one more time, study" is one of its key slogans. And it comes with a particular intellectual intensity of classifying different forms of

modernity, in which “capitalism” and “imperialism” are opposed to socialism in its different varieties (state socialism, peasant socialism, anarchism). All these are ranked and classified on the grounds of which is the “higher” stage, which is “normal,” and which is a “crime.” Here, truth is the gift; disagreement a particular form of gift politics. This is not only the politics of the gift of Adam Smith versus the gift of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, and the gift of the last three versus the gift of Kropotkin, Chaianov, Mauss, and so on. Performance of the gift in contemporary Western art, too, is a way of critiquing modern art as/and capital (Cummings and Lewandowska 2001, 2007; Maraniello, Risaliti, and Somain 2001; Moore 2004; Sansi 2010; Smith 2002). What is important here is that buying an argument about modernity is almost the same as buying modernity as an argument. Opinions about the exhibition are easily translated into opinions about its subject matter, and these “gift/knowledge” relations into academic exchange.¹³

Now, the gift of socialism was not the only thing performed by this project. It was only part of a complex signifying chain “Gift Exhibition–Kremlin–Moscow–Soviet Union–Russian Empire,” and an equally complex political and socioeconomic hierarchy between gift givers and recipients, between giving and taking away, and between the state and the market. Here, it is not socialism but the Russian state that appears to give as well as take. I have argued that the gift of socialism was constructed by the obligation to reciprocate—as it was articulated by gifts to Soviet leaders as counter-gifts to gratitude and by comments about socialism being forcibly taken away. I suggest that the locus that puts this gift into relations of exchange with all these other forms of identity is different: it is the obligation to receive, and it is with regard to the gift of the exhibition itself. This locus forms the second nexus of gift/knowledge relations.

A “thank you for the exhibition,” followed by a comment, is very different from the “thank you” that concludes a purchase. It does not constitute a terminal point in a transaction but, on the contrary, makes the visit into an exchange in a field of continuous relations (cf. Callon and Latour 2011). Comments are a *return* that extends these relations and a surplus of this relationality. I described this in the beginning of this essay as an open-ended conversation that never reached a completion. But this is a return to a peculiar kind of giving that holding an exhibition entailed. This return performs a connection that makes exhibitions a public gift—particularly exhibitions by state museums. Even if these museums charge for admission, what is put on display is linked with the notion of decommercialized public property. This, in turn, performs the gift connotations of creative art and scholarship—both in the sense of the “talent” that the artist or scholar “has” and a product or result of this talent that they “give.” The state/museum has an obligation to share—and so does the artist or scholar have an obligation “not to bury their talent.”

But “thank you for the exhibition” is not a counter-gift. It is an acknowledgement that the gift has been received. In other words, it highlights what is ethnographically

¹³ That, in turn, is linked with notions of intellectual property, complex forms of giving such as research and exhibition grants, and subtle relations of debt, obligation, and innovation in academic debate and writing—in other words, with the connection and separation of research creativity and the economics of it.

murky and untheorized—the obligation to receive. Gift theory has dwelled extensively on the obligation to reciprocate as a way to lock gift relations in a singularity of the gift of socialism (Ssorin-Chaikov 2006a) or gifts of empire (Grant 2009) or a gift ring of Trobriand *kula* (Malinowski 1922). Focusing on the obligation to receive creates a different ethnographic angle. There is a Russian saying that one should not look a gift horse in the mouth. If it is a gift, one should not check its teeth as if one is buying it. But the message of this saying is, of course, that actually the inverse happens. In the case of *Gifts to Soviet Leaders*, the response includes not merely notes of gratitude but also resentment, aesthetic criticism, and political polemic. In this obligation to receive, what is given is turned into a matter of opinion—into knowledge. But in this space of continuous exchange of opinion, connections are multiplied, the ring of socialism unlocked and relocked again in a chain: “Gift Exhibition–Kremlin–Moscow–Soviet Union–Russian Empire.”

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ОТНОШЕНИЯ ДАРА/ЗНАНИЯ НА ВЫСТАВКЕ ПОДАРКОВ СОВЕТСКИМ ВОЖДЯМ

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Данное исследование проводилось одновременно с кураторской работой на выставке «Дары вождям» (Музеи Московского Кремля, 2006) (еще одним куратором выставки была Ольга Соснина). Я выражаю благодарность Ольге Сосниной, Паоло Хэйвуду, Макс Уотсону, Маре Поглобски, Хадидже Кэрролл, Михалу Муравски, Феликсу Рингелю, Саре Уилсон, Джону Милнеру, Роджеру Санси и редакторам Laboratorium за комментарии и конструктивную критику на разных стадиях работы над текстом.

Настоящее исследование посвящено анализу реакции публики на выставку «Дары вождям» (Музеи Московского Кремля, 2006) – начиная от записей в книге отзывов и заканчивая решением Музеев Московского Кремля преподнести президенту Владимиру Путину экземпляр каталога выставки в подарок к 55-летию в 2007 году. Задача исследования – продемонстрировать, каким образом отношения знания, формирующие сложную постсоветскую аудиторию с точки зрения социальной памяти, принимают форму дара, и – наоборот – как дарение воспроизводит отношения знания/власти. Обзор вносит вклад в теорию дара и в антропологическое понимание перформативности. Он также служит иллюстрацией особенностей работы метода этнографического концептуализма – концептуального искусства на антропологические темы и концептуального искусства как средства антропологического исследования.

Ключевые слова: дар; знание; дар/знание; перформативность; этнографический концептуализм; концептуальное искусство; власть