



*The Sacred Body of the Angel of Prehistory*  
meteorite, 4.500.000 BC  
collection of the Museum of Russian History

## Becoming a Meteorite

Boris Groys

We experience our contemporaneity as being defined by a complicated set of economic, political and artistic conflicts. Looking at contemporary events, one involuntarily registers which side their protagonists take. However, in the context of the museum the conflicts of the past epochs lose their grip on the imagination of the spectator. Rather, one begins to notice the similarity between the communicative means by which conflicting messages and attitudes are formulated and transmitted. In the museum one begins to understand that, as stated by Marshall McLuhan, “the medium is the message.” The goal of Arseniy Zhilyaev’s Museum of Russian History is precisely to reveal the commonality of the medium behind the individual messages that circulate in the contemporary Russian media space. Thus, this project aims to musealize contemporaneity and to let its language, its medium carry its own message.

For Zhilyaev, there is indeed a common ground between Putin’s image making and artistic strategies of his adversaries: they both operate by the means of performance. The politically engaged artists/activists enter the sphere of public attention by staging performances that produce media waves throughout the country and eventually worldwide, as it was the case with the groups Voina and, especially, Pussy Riot. However, it is not only the oppositional art groups that organize public performances to attract media attention, but also Putin himself. And he is going much further in this respect that most of his counterparts in the contemporary political world. His public appearances with a tiger, or kissing a pike, or flying with the white cranes, or picking up an ancient Greek amphora from the seabed look very much like artistic performances. These actions are not, strictly speaking, of political nature. Rather, they serve to design Putin’s image as a private person in the public space, i.e. to politicize the private. They thematize Putin’s physical fitness, his individual skills, and his masculine appeal. Like many other contemporary artists, Putin places his own body at the center of his performances. Besides, he stages these performances as any successful contemporary artist would do it: by making them spectacular, sensational, and generating massive media waves. Of course, by interpreting Putin as one of Russia’s contemporary performance artists, Zhilyaev produces an ironic effect that makes his project very entertaining, similar to the one provoked by the

Russian artists of the 1970s as they interpreted Stalin as an artist. But this comparison also reveals the differences in the way in which politics and art manifested themselves in modernity – and the way they do it in our time.

The paradigmatic modern artists understood themselves as architects of a new life. The same applies to modern politicians. Stalin was an architect of the whole political, social and economic structure of the Soviet Union, including its media space. Today nobody can shape, structure and totally control the media. The contemporary media space is a global archive from which an individual user borrows particular items, almost accidentally. Every event presents itself through its documentation. The staging of a performance coincides with its documentation and archiving. Thus, our own contemporaneity always appears to us already as a part of the past. It is no coincidence that the Museum of Contemporary Art became the most characteristic institution of our time. Such real-time musealization provokes artists and politicians to stage yet another performance and to create yet another sensation time and again, in a repeated attempt to penetrate the media surface and produce convulsions in the whole body of the media sphere.

Obviously Zhilyaev does not want to participate in this competition for media impact – also because he does not believe that any artist or politician is able to win it. After all, both will certainly lose this competition to any middle-sized meteorite or a UFO. That does not mean that Zhilyaev holds a neutral position in the ideological, political and artistic struggles of his time. For him, as for all of us, the difference between the performance artist in the Kremlin and performance artists sentenced to spend several years in Russian labor camps is obvious enough. Rather, being confronted with the typical contemporary choice between becoming a media hero by imitating a meteorite or acting as an analytical spectator of the mechanisms and strategies of media success, Zhilyaev chooses the second option. He describes the discursive and media conditions of becoming a meteorite instead of trying to become one. Among its other aspects, his Museum of Russian History offers a persuasive explanation of this personal choice made by its author.

## RED ROOM