

Tracing Russian E-Lit in Contemporary Art Scene. A Report on Russian Electronic Literature Collection at ELMCIP Knowledge Base.

"You didn't see the thing because you didn't know how to look. And you don't know how to look because you don't know the names."

(Don DeLillo, Underworld 540 (Tabbi Joseph, Towards a Semantic Literary Web)).

Russian E-Literature Collection in ELMCIP (Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity in Practice) Knowledge Base is one of 9 collections being developed by the Knowledge Base permanent team and invited researchers as myself. *Russian Electronic Literature Collection (RELC)*, as a work in progress, is an attempt to bring together and classify a number of born digital and digitized literary works primarily since the beginning of the 1990s created in Russian language or translated into Russian. At the present moment it is the only comprehensive collection representing e-lit work written in Russian produced by a large number of communities. A special feature introduced in this collection first was the "name in the original language option" making this collection a valuable source for a cross-cultural research.

Twentieth century in Russian literature is often referred to as a site for experimentation. First avant-garde scholars like Shklovsky and Jakobson have been developing the optics of analyzing interdisciplinary work combining visual and graphic aspects. The second avantgarde: Moscow conceptualism, Helenukt school in Leningrad, Uktusk school in Eisk further developed both the creative and critical field. Spread of sound processing and recording technologies allowed for the development of sound poetry (Alexander Gornon). Electronic literature in Russian context can be regarded as the third digital avantgarde inheriting the possible audiences, but unfortunately not the real institutional affiliations at the moment. Other conceptual sources include game design and net art, lately a variety of textual media archeological installations have been shown. So Russian electronic literature represented in ELMCIP Knowledge Base is uniting ideologically and geographically disperse communities of contemporary and media art, net art, videopoetry, neterature (cereparypa), contemporary poetry by means of creating a unified taxonomy of the field as a whole.

Teneta and Neterature

In Russia the spread of personal computers coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union and spread of Internet technology (Anurkina, 2008). Thus the notion of electronic literature is oriented towards a notion of networked literature, “neterature”, and discussion of the virtual space of the Internet. The term “electronic literature” itself wasn’t brought into play in Russian discourse to designate a digitally born work of literary art for reading on the computer screen until 2011, when it was first used by Mikhail Vizel in his review of N. Katherine Hayles’ book *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (2008). Henrike Schmidt applies the term “digital literature”, as opposed to “digitized” (Schmidt, 2006), which treats the computer as a type of archive. “Neterature” or “cyberature” (Riabov, 2001) are used by the Net Literature portal community (Vizel, 2011).

Leonid Tyraspolsky and Vladimir Novikov, in *Aesthetics of the Internet* (2001), and Henrike Schmidt in *Literal Immobility* (2006), stress the material quality of the digital media, allowing it to realize literary tropes. The essential qualities for a work to be considered a piece of neterature are summarized by Gennady Riabov, in *Net – or – rature?* (2001), as:

1. Creativity
2. Use of “letters”[буковки] as the key means of expression (as in Gerdiaev’s *Drama in the Forest* (2001)
3. Use of hyperlinks
4. Dynamic nature
5. Use of multimedia
6. Multiple authors
7. Transparency of the authorsⁱ
8. Author-reader interaction.

The Teneta (1994) literary contest marked the beginning of the Russian specialized e-lit community. Apart from poetry, prose and translation, it included nominations in “Hypertext Literature”, “the Creative Environments”, “Literary Games”, “Dynamic Literature”, and “Virtual Character”. Teneta positioned itself as a “pure Internet contest”. The best texts, originally published on the Internet, were to be nominated. The process of nomination was intended to guarantee the quality of the literary works. Teneta was known for its wide spectrum of interest, as exemplified by the selection of the nominators, such as

Artemy Troitsky, Anton Nosik and Alexey Andreev, all belonging to different communities. Meanwhile Teneta failed to attract funding and a very small number of judges were working in their free time. It came to an end in 2002 with the optimistic justification “due to the enormous amount of works”.

Cyberature, part of the *Net Literature* portal, is the first known collection of Russian electronic literature. It embraces a selection of *Teneta* award-winning works and continues to publish e-lit, although less vigorously. Since the *Teneta* archive is no longer available online, *Cyberatura* provides the best selection of Russian e-lit from 1998 to 2008. The genres represented include:

- **hypertext**, *My boyfriend came back from the war* (1996) by Olia Lialina, *Waste Land* (1999) by Julia Morozova, *Shatters* (2000) and *Voyage X* (2000) by Vladimir Tatarintsev
- **hypermedia**, *In the Subway (and Outside)* (2001) by Sergey Vlasov and Georgy Gerdiaev, *F.M.DostoevskyIDIOT* (2001) and *Starfall* (2000) by Alexroma;
- **networked art**, *Boutes Rimes* (1995) and *Garden of Forking Hokkus* (1997) by Dmitry Manin
- **flash poetry**, *Drama in the Forest* (2001) and *The City* (2008) by Georgy Gerdiaev, *Signs* (2006) by Ivan Levenko, *Sonnets* (2004) by Igor Loschilov and Georgy Gerdiaev
- **poetry generator**, *Cyber Pushkin* (2002) by Sergeij Teterin and *Robot Datzuk* (1997, scholarly essay generator)
- **playable media**, *Sharp-set Angels* (2003) and *Poetry Puzzle* (2000) by Alexroma
- **PowerPoint poem**, *The Till* (2003) by Maxim Borodin

Russian E-Lit Collection in ELMCIP KB

However important and innovative *Teneta* was for the 90s, it still failed to reflect a wide community across the *Cyberature* portal borders, as well as continuity in time. Thus the e-lit generation of 2000 and 2010 remained unrepresented there. By now, as the highlights of the *Russian Electronic Literature Collection* works by Orbita text-group, Ivan Khimin and Anna Tolkacheva should be named. Before the collection none of them was seen either as electronic literature, or digital writing, and instead was (not) fitting either contemporary poetry, or contemporary art.

Mid 2000s brought wide interest to media poetry and groups like Orbita, Dreli Kuda Popalo etc came into play. The development of Russian media art led to a mediashift, due to increase in speed of the Internet and availability of other soft and hardware tools, video poetry and flash poetry gained popularity. In addition to digitized by Alexandre Gornon *Tango with Cows*, we can now talk about postdigital textual work by Ivan Khimin. Young artists like Anna Tolkacheva (Nizhny Novgorod) started to work intuitively, without knowing much about their European or American predecessors, in digital performance, generative poetics, and digital archeology.

A number of festivals in Riga, Perm, Kransojarsk, Moscow and St. Petersburg have taken place over the last decade. The first videopoetry festival *Words in Motion* took place in Riga in 2001 (Orbita, 2013), a year before world famous *Zebra Literary Film Festival* (Berlin, 2002). Portals like Asia Nemchenok's blog Videopoezija (2012), SELF-ID (SELF-ID, 2013), and Videopoezija.ru (2013) have also been established. There have appeared a number of creative groups, like Orbita (Orbita, 2013), the Laboratory of Poetic Actionism (2013), Machine Libertine (2012), Zlystra and Pupstrip (2012), amongst others.

Net.art legacy established by Da-Da-Net Festival (1993-1999), as well as the influence of Alexander Shulgin's lectures at Pro Arte Media Art Program (2000-2001), can be traced in Ivan Khimin's asceticist (ASCII+asceticism) installations and postdigital painting *Strokes and Incisions* (2012). It involves three dot matrix printers continuously reproducing basic ASCII characters thus alluding to strokes and incisions of pre-Cyrillic Slavic writing. Abstract language signs printed on the endless scrolls of paper remind of one of the ways of storing early Slavonic writings on birch bark. While the basis of all Ivan Khimin's art is *ASCIITICIST TV* (2004), net art style black square, from which his postdigital paintings and installations materialize, a minimalistic, schematic version of a Soviet TV set with 11 channels of moving signs on the screen.

The language of Anna Tolkacheva's *Videopoetry 1* and *Videopoetry 2* is playfully computational. *Videopoetry 1* uses constructivist typography of the word "голова" ("the head") that embraces figurative curls of "the thoughts"/"whirlwinds" twirling within its grown letters/posts. In *Videopoetry 2* builds between "I" and "you", rhyming in Russian, "behold", "belong", "don't dare to execute", "can fly": "I can fly you". The similar sort of concrete interplay between the visual and verbal is unfolded in SlovaNova 2012 winner "Freedom is". *The Digital Performance* by Anna Tolkacheva was a part of the XVII Verlibre Festival in Nizhny Novgorod in 2011. The figure of the national poet Alexandre Pushkin was an occasion and excuse for generative poetics experimentation – in the real time, while the poets were reading, "the percentage of their pushkinness" was computed on the screen. The *Color of the Poet*, another digital performance setting Red (Vladimir Mayakovsky), Green (Alexandre Vvedensky), and Blue (Anna Akhmatova) to compute the color of the

poet based on the similarity of the vocabulary used in the poem was presented at XX Verlibre Festival in St.Petersburg, and later at E-Poetry 2013 in London.

Orbita, famous in Eastern Europe and Baltic countries text-group (similar to rock-group) is conquering the contemporary art scene. Their audioinstallation *Radio Wall*, an immersive blend of recorded radio shows in different languages, noises and poems was shortlisted in Kourekhin Prize 2013. *Right*, a media archeological installation built of modified fax machines performing the same print job in a loop for days when printing the monostych to drawing a pattern, was presented at *Text=Attals* exhibition at KIM Gallery, Riga, Latvia in February 2012. On one hand, it represents mechanic circling forming of a machine given a task it cannot stop performing, on the other hand, the text repeated acquires the aspect of graphicality, linguistic signs trasformed to graphic image, a pattern of graphic symbols. The thermal printing technology used in faxes (instead of ink) allowed for installation to go on during a month without a break.

More and more digital literary practices and techniques are employed by contemporary poetry communities: media performances by Anna Tolkacheva at XVIIth and XXth Verlibre Festivals, Multimedia Performance by Vanessa Place and Ivan Khimin at Andrey Bely Centre (St. Petersburg, 2013), *Dragon Dictation* by Roman Osminkin, Anton Komandirov, and Sergey Ermakov, a performance at #13 *Translit Almanach* presentation (St.Petersburg, 2013).

Since Teneta, the first Internet literature contest was closed, its inheritor Net Literature has not been as dynamic. A more successful e-lit's policy of conquering more and more attention at the contemporary art and poetry scene is reflected at the present stage of *Russian Electronic Literature Collection*.

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ⁱ By “transparency” Ryabov here means that the names of the authors are known.