LBZK: Heart Mistresses

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It's terrible—not to love, horrible—not to dare.
Vladimir Mayakovsky, About This

Of the many modes of representation taken on by Komad one of the most quietly assertive and creatively diffused depends on the image of her own body. The self-presence she negotiates is not, however, modeled after the self-portrait, even in its most radical modernist inflections. For Komad prefers to image herself alongside, or umbilically connected to the paintings and objects she makes—in at least one case literally (Omphallus: The Navel of the World, 2007). She is often linked to her wall and floor works in photographs that become works in themselves. Her venture of an appositional self looks back, however, to some of the iconic moments in which the female face was embedded in, sometimes subjected to, and, more often than not, in excess of, the formal and social rhetorics of a masculinist avant-garde. Komad's self-presentation is marked by several previous formations of female, avant-garde selfhood. It glimpses, first of all, at the presencing of a muse (as with the Gala of Paul Eluard and then Salvador Dalí); though in her case she is a muse unto herself, presiding over the performative destiny of her own reception, rather than the object of reverence, obeisance or mystification. She effectively redirects some of the erotics and fetishization of this position, preserving its intensities but missing out the male protagonist who for the Surrealist generation in particular fired up the iconic status of its sundry femmes fatales and not-so-new women. Once asked to what extent she sees herself as "part of [her] work," Komad replied: "I am a slave to my work."1 Her subjection is only to the work itself, and it is in this sense—and in devotion to this cause—that she makes so frankly visible the self who works.

We can find a more engaging historical signature for the presence of the female artist in the persona of pianist, sculptor, writer, actress, film director and editor, Lily Brik (b. Lilya Urievna Kagan, 1891), wife of the Formalist theorist Ossip Brik, friend of Sergei Eisenstein, Vladimir Mayakovsky and the Russian Futurists, and a kind of figurehead for the LEF (Left Front of Art) movement in the 1920s.2 Lily Brik endured the purging, exile and execution of many of her artistic and intellectual friends, but lived until 1978, her home serving as meeting place for the unofficial culture of 1950s and 1960s Moscow, writers, musicians, artists, and filmmakers including poet Andrei Voznesensky and filmmaker Sergei Parajanov. While Brik was made most visible to subsequent generations by the predominantly (though by no means exclusively) male avant-gardists in her Moscow circle, and while she figured as a muse to Mayakovsky and many others (Pablo Neruda called her the "muse" of entire "Russian avant-garde"), Lily has come down to us imbued with attributes of strength, self-possession and message-bearing passion that resemble and anticipate similar dimensions of proactive outreach in Komad's work. There is also, of course, an unmistakable physiognomic continuity between Lily and Zenita with their straight, dark, parted hair, defiant, yet engaging frontal postures, striking, rounded features, and dissembling 'severity.'

But there are other connections between these charismatic women who endured, contested, and perhaps defeated the much-touted eclipse of aura by production proclaimed by the Russian Constructivists, Walter Benjamin and others almost a century ago. Both define their work and themselves in large part through collaboration, Brik with Rodchenko, Eisenstein and the rest;

Komad in her home city of Vienna with singers such as counter-tenor Johannes Reichert and soprano Maria Harpner; composers and librettists including Lothar Schmid, a chess grand master, Regina Pokorna, and artists such as Erwin Wurm (who all participated in the aptly titled Operation Capablanca, 2005). While Komad's work is often more directed or auteur-like than Brik's more subtle imbrications, both women work as much with tactical relinquishment and strategic recallibration as through the signature command structures of the modernist 'master.' Both, too, commit to a space in their practice that openly addresses their passions, loves and personal drives; but both refuse to direct this through the kind of masculine protestation that informed so much of Mayakovsky's lyrical poetry—above all his About This, a wrenching report on his unabating obsession with Lily which commenced in a menage-a-trois with the Briks in the early 1920s and contributed to his suicide in 1930.

Lily, in fact, was known to many of her contemporaries simply as ?.?. or ?.?.?., the first letters of a Russian word "??????" (love); and even Josef Stalin was caught up in her spell as it endured the demise of the Soviet avant-garde in the late 1920s and early 30s. A function, in part, of the two generations that separate them, Komad's discourse on love is not as perfervid, vicarious and missionary as Lily's, though it is no less oracular. Many of her paintings and sculpture-tableau are inscribed with hand-written maxims and slogans, literary quotes and philosophical apothegms, several offering quizzically reflective meditations on emotional exchange: "I can't make you love me if you don't!" (1998), the surface of which is flecked with red hearts; "Ich liebe Euch" (I love you, 2006) with its stuffed index finger gesturing fearlessly at the viewer; "Aut liebe aut nihil" (2003), the disarming portrait of a Darwin-featured Neanderthal; and "I Love you," inscribed in Russian-language Cyrillic script over a field of white, tusk-like bars (2006). In some pieces the amorous parameters are not underscored with text but directed by iconography, often mythological, as in "Leda and the Swan" (2004), which images the morphological entanglement of bird and woman. The swan's lipstick-red beak bites into a black-headed Leda with her crying eye, racing hair and a unicorn-like protuberance shooting from her forehead.

The emotive proclivities of Komad's work are usually dispensed and redirected rather than flagrant or dissipated. They thrive on permutation and speculative juxtaposition often coupled with elisions, acrostics and anagrammatical reversal. "Aut liebe aut nihil," for example, substitutes the German word "Liebe" (love) for the usual, political, subject of this phrase, Cesar or Cesare (thus "Aut Cesare, aut nihil," "Cesar or Nothing," motto of the notorious Cesare Borgia)—so that the tyrannical call for total allegiance merges with the amatory anarchism of "Love is All." In a different register, "Verum gaudium res severa est" ("True joy is a serious thing," 2005) scrambles the elongated and typographically dispersed letters of Seneca's Latin saying around a figure of 8 or infinity sign that hovers uneasily against a black background. The Stoic philosopher's injunctions against excess of all kinds, whether political, juridical or emotional, forms the backdrop for Komad's twist on this cautionary tale advocating for the salutary rational management of all forms of emotion, whether joy, pleasure or anger.3 So while Lily bellows out her Revolutionary injunction to buy and read books in Rodchenko's famous poster for the Leningrad branch of the State publishing house, Gosizdat (1924), Zenita masks herself behind a self-revealing array of cryptic slogans and literary allusions, the abstractions of which implicate artist and viewer in a conspiracy to declare and simultaneously to temporize emotive signification.

Komad brings the emotive and the collaborative together in couplets of love and liaison that accumulate in the overarching metaphor of conjunction that governs her practice, ZENITA CITY. "Familiar surroundings," she notes, "come about during the course of the work cycles. Very clear affinities of soul, loves and friendships have developed over time. Naturally! During the work on films and productions, a collective vision develops! The heart is the master!"4 Her

actions and contexts collide in both micro- and macrocosmic arrangements, in bare pairs and grandiose pluralities. Some of them team up in twos to make temporary structures, like her houses of cards. But her quixotic version of the “femme maison” opens out into a wilder urbanism of expanded selfhood, clustering households into neighborhoods and uncanny conurbations, as the artist takes on the networked conditions of the 21st century metropolis.

1 Zenita Komad, Interview with Ursula Krinzinger, www.zenita-city.at/texte/text9.html
2 On Lily Brik, see, Love is the Heart of Everything: Correspondence Between Vladimir Mayakovsky and Lili Brik, 1915–1930, edited by Bengt Jangfeldt., trans. Julian Graffey (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1986); Vahan D. Barooshian, Brik and Mayakovsky (Mouton: Slavistic Printings and Reprintings [301], 1976); Ann and Samuel Charters, I Love: The Story of Vladimir Mayakovsky and Lili Brik, and Edward J. Brown’s review, Russian Review, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Apr., 1980), pp. 267–269; see also, “The Futurists’ Muse, Lili Brik: Femme Fatale”, Solyanka Art Gallery, Moscow, 13 April–6 May 2007.
3 For more on this question, see M. Graver, Stoicism and Emotion (Chicago, 2007).
4. Zenita Komad, Interview with Ursula Krinzinger, www.zenita-city.at/texte/text9.html