A TWO-WAY PERFORMANCE:
PAVEL FILONOVI AND HIS LENINGRAD PUBLIC*

In this essay I would like to deal with two of the last episodes when the Russian avant-garde and the Russian public confronted each other socially and politically. From the 1910s through the mid-1920s an overt audience response, sometimes a negative one, or, in the case of Futurist performances, even a direct physical interaction, was part of the theatrical experience. The emergence of a Stalinist political culture rudely interrupted this dialogue and replaced it by a general, uniform, positive, and passive acceptance.

As in other totalitarian regimes of the 1930s, the provocative debates between the avant-garde and its audience came to be replaced by a sophisticated technology of mass communication. How did this happen? I will try to explain this by resorting to two concrete episodes: two of the last public appearances of the Leningrad painter Pavel Nikolaevich Filonov and the official response to them.¹ The first of these was Filonov's participation in Igor Terent'ev's production of Gogol's play The Inspector General, designed by

* Some of the information presented in this article appeared in my monograph on Pavel Filonov, co-authored with John E. Bowlt, Pavel Filonov: A Hero and His Fate (Austin, Tex.: Silvergirl, 1983).

¹ Filonov, Pavel Nikolaevich (born Moscow, 8 January 1883; died Leningrad, 3 December 1941). In 1897, as an orphan, Filonov moved to his married sister's apartment in St. Petersburg; attended classes in house-painting and decorating; 1903, he began to attend evening classes at the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts; 1903-08 attended the private studio of the Academician Lev Dmitriev-Kavkazskii; 1908-10 attended the Academy of Arts; 1910 expelled from the Academy; 1910-14 close to the Union of Youth, contributing to three of its exhibitions; 1912 traveled six months to Italy and France; 1913 with Iosif Shkolnik designed decor for Maiakovskii's tragedy Vladimir Maiakovskii; 1914-15 illustrated Futurist booklets and published a long, "trans-rational" poem with his own illustrations called Propoven a proposi mirovi (Chant of Universal Flowering); began to work on his so-called "Ideology of Analytical Art and Principle of Madeness"; 1914 published his manifesto "Made Paintings"; 1916-18 military service on the Romanian front; 1919 represented at the first State Free Exhibition of Works of Art in Petrograd; 1923 professor at the Academy of Arts in Petrograd and associate of the Inkhuk; published his Declaration of Universal Flowering in Zhizn' iskusstva (Life of Art); 1925 established the Collective of Masters of Analytical Art (the Filonov School); 1929-30 one-man exhibition planned at the Russian Museum, Leningrad, but not opened; 1931-33 supervised the illustrations for the Academic edition of the Kalevala; 1932-33 contributed to the exhibition "Artists of the RSFSR over the Last 15 Years" in Leningrad and Moscow.
the Filonov Collective of Masters of Analytical Art (the so-called Filonov School in 1927). The second instance was also a kind of theatrical extravaganza, or a “performance,” organized around and against Filonov’s proposed one-man exhibition in Leningrad, in 1929. It was between these two dates, 1927 and 1929, that the Soviet bureaucracy crystallized its ideological attitude toward the cultural consumer, encouraging mass consensus.

In 1927 this was promoted essentially through an active campaign against the Terent’ev production in the press, but by the 1929 Filonov exhibition there were already clear signs of an absurd, yet rationally organized, campaign against Formalism. Indeed, for the Soviet authorities Filonov’s non-exhibition served as a kind of showcase for demonstrating to the public the essence of “Decadent Art,” and in the 1930s and 1940s his name became synonymous with ultra-Formalism. He was so condemned, for example, in Osip Beskin’s 1933 essay Formalizm v zhivopisi and in Ezhegodnik literatury i iskusstva na 1929, where Filonov’s art was censored both by the authors and by the editors.

The “Last Futurist Performance” by Terent’ev in Leningrad in 1927 raises many important questions for the study of the fate of the Russian avant-garde. In retrospect, this production seems to have been precisely a performance rather than a straightforward interpretation of Gogol’s masterpiece. Terent’ev’s dramatization irritated both the critics and the audience to some extent.

2. According to “Vystavka Filonova v Russkom Muzee” (TsGALI, f. 2348, op. 1, ed. khr., 23), Filonov was given space in the Academy of Arts, Leningrad, in June 1925 in order to conduct courses with a group of students: “Lessons were conducted gratis and ran daily from 10 a.m. until 8-10 p.m. through the fall. A three-day exhibition of student works was then organized in the Academy and was visited by 1,300 people. This group gave rise to the Collective of Masters of Analytical Art.” Although the Collective of Masters of Analytical Art was and is referred to as a “School,” it would be misleading to regard it as a system or program of regular courses, classwork, and homework. The Collective embarked upon several joint ventures, including exhibitions, stage productions, and the 1933 illustrated edition of the Kalevala. The Collective was ousted from the Academy in 1927 and ceased to exist officially with the passing of the Party decree On the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations in 1932.

3. I refer here to the one-man exhibition hung in two halls of the Russian Museum, Leningrad, and scheduled for the summer of 1929, but never opened officially. Filonov compiled a list of over 300 exhibits with title and date in the spring of 1929 and obviously regarded the scheduled exhibition as a major event in his artistic life. Filonov’s handwritten catalog for the exhibition is in TsGALI, f. 2358, op. 1, ed. khr. 28. For information on the history of the Filonov non-exhibition, see Nicoletta Misler, “Pavel Nikolaevich Filonov. Slovo i znak,” Russian Literature (Amsterdam), 11, No. 3 (April 1982), 255 ff.


5. See I. L. Matsa et al., eds., Ezhegodnik literatury i iskusstva na 1929 g. (Moscow: Kommunisticheskaiia Akademiia, 1929), pp. 481-82.