HANDMADE BOOKS AND VISUAL POEMS OF SERGEI SIGEI – A RUSSIAN "TRANSFURIST"

A group of Russian poets who called themselves "Transfurists," or Neo-futurists, included Sergei Sigei, Anna Ry Nikonova-Tarshis, Boris Konstruktor, N. I. Aksel'rod, and Vladimir Erl'. The group emerged in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) in the 1980s. "Transfurists" claimed that the basis of their poetics was transponirovanie (transposing), that is, the development and synthesis of all poetic schools and trends that exist or ever existed. Even though the group has disintegrated, Sergei Sigei still is one of the most fruitful and gifted Russian artists working in the sphere of experimental literature; he is an artist and a poet who turned his own life into a work of experimental art. Sigei's works are numerous, and I do not intend to write a chronological survey of all of them. I do, however, intend to address his most peculiar hand-made books and visual poems.

Sigei’s books can be found in many libraries and archives, for instance in the British library and the Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of concrete and visual poetry, the major and most famous archives of rare and artistic books and experimental literary works in America. In comparison with other contemporary Russian experimentalists, such as Sergei Biriukov and Dmitry Bulatov, Sergei Sigei can be regarded as a true zaumnik, who, indeed, writes poetry in "words or language whose meaning is "indefinite" or indeterminate." However, zaum', or transrational poetry, is only one of Sigei’s poetic practices some of which will be the focus of this article.

Sigei organized an Anarcho-Futurist group in Vologda in 1962-64 and became a member of the Uktusskaia group in Sverdlovsk in 1965-74. In 1965-75, Sigei together with Anna Ry Nikonova-Tarshis "published" thirty-five issues of a hand-written journal Nomer. A different handmade journal on ex-

experimental art – Transponans – was started in 1979 and came out in five copies of each issue till the 1990s. Besides journals Sigei ‘published’ handmade books; his major poetry books include: Stikhi dlia balerina Bol’shoi teatra (The poems for ballet-dancers of the Bol’shoi Theatre), Russian Game with Letters (1990), Made in Zaumland (1993), Blut Poesie (1992), Il’iazdic Zaum-mail (together with Ry Nikonova and Vittore Baroni, 1995), Flaccid (together with J. M. Bennett, 1994), and Crayon Picture Book (also with J. M. Bennett, 1995). In 1993, Sigei published his article “Plius latinizatsiia russkogo iazyka” (Plus latinisation of the Russian language) in a Moscow newspaper Gumanitarnyi fond, 22. In Russia, Sigei has also published articles in journals and miscellanies, such as, Kredo, Volga, Kovcheg and in the books Index-2 and Zeugma: Russkaia poeziia ot man’erizma do postmodernizma (Zeugma: Russian poetry from mannerism to postmodernism).

Transponans published numerous manifestos written in Futurist fashion, which stated that its editors “will print previously unpublished poetry by avant-gardists of the 1910s-1920s.” And, indeed, in 1969 Sigei published “Nebesnye verlbliuzhata” (The heavenly baby camels) by Elena Guro and “Utinoe gnezdyshko dumykh slov” (The little duck’s nest of silly words) by Aleksei Kruchënykh. Both books were “printed” in watercolor. Sigei also made a book of poetry of English Dadaists that was used as a base for another book in the 1980s; and compiled a book of poems by Khodasevich which he re-wrote with black watercolour in light and spidery handwriting. In 1992, Sigei published his critical edition of poetry of Vasilisk Gnedov in the University of Trento, Italy. He also published several collections of Khlebnikov’s poetry written in his own hand and added his own texts and drawings to the collections. In these books, Sigei developed techniques of aquamania, which involves water and the affects it makes on paint and ink, and automatic writing. He also drew letters that functioned as an ornament in his texts. Sigei states that in 1969 alone he “published” about twenty manuscript books of poetry.

When making manuscript books, Sigei frequently uses rubber stamps and experiments with what he calls sobukvy, ligatures, as well as collages (Figs. 1 and 2). As Sigei writes in his article published in Chernovik, rubber-stamps were recommended as a synthetic sign of poetry by a Russian Constructivist Chicherin. At present, the rubber stamps are used in visual poetry both for

6. This is reminiscent of a medieval scribal tradition: if the scribe was producing physically short lines (lines with the requisite number of syllables for a certain meter but that take up less room than usual on the page) and filling in the gaps with flourishes.