new Moscow monuments, or, states of innocence

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In the 1990s, the Georgian sculptor Zurab Tsereteli triggered a furor over the millions of tax dollars the Moscow city government paid him for his monumental art installations around the Russian capital. Critics have assailed such gross expenditure in a period of economic privation, questioned the propriety of Tsereteli's ties to power, and ridiculed his often cartoon-like aesthetics. In the embattled new Russian state, this infantilization of public space through government-sponsored art reprises a familiar discourse of timeless innocence in the service of state power. [Russia, Moscow, monuments, state power, time, art]

Step aside, heroes of untold scandals . . .
Make way, rogues of political blackmail.
Get back, vengeful court conspirators and pharaohs of financial pyramids!
You, lowly public, no strangers to political machination, take off your hats.
Welcome the ship which has grandly sailed into the eye of a great Moscow scandal.
At the head of the tiny vessel . . .
Stand Peter in bronze, and Zurab Tsereteli in the flesh.

—Mikhail Shcherbachenko (1997:24)

Like the avant-garde, Stalinist culture continues to be oriented to the future; it is projective rather than mimetic, a visualization of the collective dream of the new world and a new humanity. . . . It does not retire to the museum, but aspires to exert an active influence on life.

—Boris Groys (1992:113)

Since the fall of the USSR, few images of Russia's courtship of new democratic traditions have drawn as much attention as scene after scene of Soviet-era monuments as they tumbled to the ground. This was perhaps most famously captured in the dismantling of the legendary security potentate, Feliks Dzerzhinskii, from his pedestal outside Moscow's KGB headquarters in August of 1991. The rise and fall of monuments—but especially the fall—has become a central idiom for explaining the fragilities of power, the changing of the guard, and a Soviet cultural project somehow gone awry. What better images to embody historical turnarounds so dizzying that "all fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away," when almost literally "all that is solid melts into air" (Marx and Engels 1985:17).
In the rush to read Soviet-era monuments as social hieroglyphs for a now older age, it has often been easy to assume that the topplings of Soviet leaders’ stone doubles somehow mark the finality of transition rather than its beginnings. Awakening from a deep slumber, rebuilding civil society, and making an ever-in-progress transition from communism to capitalism, closure to openness, and Orient to Occident—these are the new stereotypes of Russia’s latest revolutionary rite of passage. They are also problematic stereotypes. In the emphasis on awakening, rebirth, and reconstruction, the tendency has been to presume dramatic departures for a country that never physically went anywhere. Thousands of political leaders, for example, did little more than change their office letterhead, while citizens continue to negotiate a concept of “transition” that is far from benevolent (Kramer 1998; Shlapentokh 1996; Varese 1997).

My concern in this article is that in the drive to find analytical programs to make sense of such rapid regime change across the formerly socialist world, it is possible to lose sight of the still largely regnant Soviet cosmological frames that long lent, and still lend, so much meaning to so many. Nowhere is this collision between past and present perhaps more evident than in the saga of new Moscow monuments being raised in place of old. Wondering what makes some of the more remarkable additions to Moscow’s stone landscape “new,” I consider the recent work of one of the former Soviet Union’s most prominent artists, Georgian sculptor Zurab Tsereteli. Graphic illustrator, painter, sculptor, architect, and “court artist,” Tsereteli has outfitted embassies, engineered Olympic Games, and served in governments. He entered the public limelight most prominently in the mid-1990s with a series of high-profile public contracts that transformed the Russian capital. These include Moscow’s World War II Victory Park in 1995, which features a 141-meter-tall obelisk capped with the Greek goddess Nika, and a generalized monument to human suffering entitled “Tragedy of the Peoples.” In 1998, he completed a new trade center below the Manezh Plaza alongside the Kremlin, replete with underground shopping concourses, parking, cafés, and restaurants; a “Russian Fairy Tales” installation in the Alexander Garden, also running outside the Kremlin’s walls, which features 50 bronze sculptures of bears, foxes, and other stars of Russian children’s folklore; a gargantuan, 45-meter-tall statue of Peter the Great along the Moscow River; the major metal work for the new Church of Christ the Savior (bell towers, wall frescoes, and crosses on the cupolas); new state emblems for the Russian parliament in the White House; and a “Tree of Fairy Tales” installation in the Moscow Zoo, an almost writhing, 10-meter-tall column of lunging beasts of prey. In the new millennium, Tsereteli has been overseeing the design of “Wonder Park,” a 927-acre children’s theme world on the edge of the city, for which he holds the land titles.

Although this raft of high-money commissions has brought Tsereteli much fame, opinion about his work has varied widely. Moscow Mayor Iurii Luzhkov has pronounced his sculptor friend “a Michelangelo for our time” (Degot’ 1997). Donald Trump, who was negotiating with Tsereteli to erect a 126-meter-tall statue of Christopher Columbus in New York City harbor, surpassing the height of the Statue of Liberty, enthused, “Zurab is a very unusual guy. This man is major and legit” (Singer 1997:59). Given the debated aesthetic virtues of his artworks, however, public skepticism over the propriety of Tsereteli’s constant contracts climbed steadily, reaching a fevered pitch in February of 1997 when art dealers and civic groups banded together to hold a referendum on whether to tear down Tsereteli’s two most visible works: the 15-story-high statue of Peter the Great and the Alexander Garden’s “Russian Fairy Tales” installations. Opponents charged that the questionable aesthetics of Tsereteli’s work were only one of the indicators suggesting his corrupted ties to Moscow’s power
circles. Few observers could overlook, however, that in the manifesto challenging Tsereteli's status as the avatar of dubious New Russian taste, even some of the most liberal and avant-garde of art critics were calling for his work not merely to be dismantled, but "liquidated" (Medvedev 1997:2)—a term graphically reminding many that the language of Bolshevik qua Stalinist political culture remained fresh in even the country's most progressive circles. On the conservative side, the ever dour Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn fumed that "Moscow is being recklessly disfigured," referring to Tsereteli's works as "massive and third-rate memorials" (Miami Herald 1996:2). In turn, Boris Yeltsin paid a visit to the city's new incarnation of Peter the Great. "I was there myself, unescorted," Yeltsin informed a group of newspaper editors. "It's truly horrible" (Reumann 1997:2). Pronouncing Luzhkov's support for Tsereteli as "vain," the Russian leader demanded to know how the country could possibly have no better artists (Hanuska 1997:5).1
As work continued on the gargantuan statue of Peter—what one Moscow columnist described as “a monster, emerging from the river, as in a horror movie” (Filipov 1997:1C)—critics expressed alarm that the proliferating number of bears, ducks, foxes, storks, and rabbits across from the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier outside the Kremlin walls was turning Moscow’s most famous historical site into a bronze petting zoo. Others asked how a country that could not pay its salaries or its pensions could afford such lavish, if not garish, endowments. Nor did opponents confine themselves to only two of Tsereteli’s recent works. Pummeling the children’s installations in the Moscow zoo (another series inspired by Russian fairy tales), the critic Mikhail Shcherbachenko wrote, “Animals meek and mild have jumped back into their cages with fright, looking out with horror onto Tsereteli’s beasts, wailing from the crimson shadows of the neglected, dying park” (1997:24). “These days only the lazy are not attacking the prolific man of monuments,” wrote the Moscow art reporter Liudmila Lunina. “Not since nuclear energy has the country protested anything so vigorously” (Lunina et al. 1997:56).

In this context I ask: Why did Moscow’s mayor’s office see benefit in the extravagant largesse of Tsereteli’s multimillion dollar commissions during the economic upheavals of the early post-Soviet period, when city employees and urban pensioners have gone without salaries, stipends, and frequently even hot running water for months at a stretch? What newly evolving stratagems and spoils of state power are at work in the post-Soviet Russian capital? What do these Moscow monuments say about new political imaginaries at work in the Russian state?

My central argument is that the choice of Tsereteli, whose works draw prominently from Russian children’s fairy tales and the realm of the fantastic, bespeaks an infantilization of public space that promotes an image of the new Russian capital as living in what I call a “state of innocence.” Drawing on a scholarship that foregrounds the ways in which monuments tranquilize or freeze time, I see in the fairy tale appearances of Tsereteli’s famous works a projection of tranquility for a fragmented country at odds over paths to political and economic improvement. For Russia, this youthful gambit introduces a new angle on public life. Whereas in the 1920s, the diplomatically embattled Soviet state earnestly emphasized its political sophistication and advancement, here in one pocket of contemporary Russian life can be found almost the opposite—the return to an age of simpler pasts and new beginnings. As a political strategy, this kind of symbolic stance should be familiar to readers well beyond Russia. One finds it in almost every American presidential election when candidates strain to claim their rural roots. Washington beltway insider Bill Clinton did so when he proclaimed himself “the little boy from Hope [Arkansas],” as did Connecticut-raised George Bush Sr. when he produced sepia-toned postcards of his days on the Texas range. Longing for a simpler past plays a part in what Ernest Gellner lays out as the basic rules of nationalist discourse in his canonic tracts on nationalism. With this “sociological self-deception, a vision of reality through a prism of illusion,” Gellner points out that no matter how deracinated and urbanized the leaders, nationalism conquers in the name of a romanticized folk culture, a simpler age, an earlier time (1983:56–57).

The Russian capital’s most recent raising of monuments to children’s fairy tales, and the articulation everywhere of innocence reborn, is a new approach for a former Soviet Union that was for so long, by contrast, anxious to assert the legitimacy of its civilization and the advancement of its socialism. Here I venture that the language of innocence effects a detour around questions of political accountability after the fall of the USSR, as well as a deferral of expectations for a rapid rise in standards of governance
and standards of living among many Russian citizens who long saw themselves as ex-
cluded from the dividends of 20th-century economic transformations. In place of the
Stalinist child hero, Pavel Morozov, the preternaturally advanced youth who, by
1930's legend, denounced his father to the secret police for hiding grain supplies,
Zurab Tsereteli's fairy-tale monuments present, by contrast, a remarkably youthful ad-
vancement for a new Russian state. Tellingly, scores of statues of Morozov, which long
presided over Soviet children's parks in the same way that Peter Pan has in Europe
and North America, were subject to the same aggressions upon the fall of the Soviet
Union as were the monuments to politicians who erected them (Gorshkov 1992).
Tsereteli's are among the most prominent of new monuments rising in their place.

**states, monuments, power**

Voluminous attention to new Moscow monuments signals an interesting chal-
lenge to what a broad literature on monuments identifies as their strategically elusive
exercise of state power. As the Austrian writer Robert Musil once wrote, the most
striking feature of monuments is that you do not notice them. It is as if they actively
deflect observation.

According to Musil, monuments repel the very attention they are supposed to attract.
"One can not say that we [do] not notice them; one would have to say they 'de-notice'
us, they elude our perceptive faculties: this is a downright vandalism-inciting quality
of theirs!" (1987:62). Somehow inciting vandalism but not attention, monuments are
there but not there, substantial but insubstantial, inanimate but alive.

This unique experience of living with, around, and among monuments that deflect
close scrutiny is part of what makes them essential elements of Philip Abrams's notion
of "the state idea," the repository of images and practices at the center of political life
(1988:58). Abrams drew attention to the rhetoric of statecraft after being struck by the
longstanding inability of political sociology to define the state with the same concrete
specificity brought to governments, political actors, or even federal systems. But
rather than eschewing the term because of its referential vagueness, Abrams saw in
the state a strategic vacuity, a zone of projection onto which politicians could screen
images of their own worth and importance. Rather than seeing the state as semiotically
deprived, Abrams saw its very emptiness as its point, arguing that the nature of state
power lay first and foremost in its ideational force, as a discursive effect of political
discourse, rather than as an embodied actor in political life. He wrote:

The state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself
the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is. There is a state-system: a
palpable nexus of practice and institutional structure centered in government and
more or less extensive, unified and dominant in any given society. There is, too, a
This notion of states relying on symbolic, mythical practices to transcend decidedly unheroic power relations at elite levels is well worn (Young 1993). This is the principle by which Roland Barthes argued that modern mythologies, particularly conservative “myths of the right,” turned history into nature (1993). Michel Foucault, in a similar gesture, built his “repressive hypothesis” around the axiom that “power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms” (1990:86).

But the siting of this elusive manifestation of power in the concept of the state is what lends the greater critical force. Michael Taussig highlighted this “powerful insubstantiality” when he pointed to “the habitual way we so casually entify ‘the State’ as a being unto itself, animated with a will and mind of its own” (1992:112). My goal, then, is not to challenge the existence of the state itself, but to explore the manifold ways by which state power is made possible. As Begona Aretxaga wrote in her work on Basque politics,

What is at stake is not only how people imagine the state—and thus produce it as a social fact—through a variety of discourses and practices, but also, and equally importantly, how state officials imagine the state and produce it through not only discourse and practices but arresting images and desires articulated in fantasy scenes. [2000:47]

With Tsereteli’s monuments, therefore, the task is not to see them as an opaque screen that hides politics, but to understand how this particular kind of masking clears space for Russian political practices. It is necessary to pick up where Abrams leaves off, as Aretxaga does when she poses “the crucial anthropological question of how the mask—as mask—works, what universe of beliefs, practices, discourse, events, fears, and desires make possible its power” (2000:53). By looking at Tsereteli’s recent work in Moscow as a particular kind of performance of innocence, I explore how these monuments build on local symbolic practices, how they map onto broader cultural and political frameworks, and how they shift gears under rapidly changing historical circumstances.6

This fusion of subject and object in the work of monuments builds on Enlightenment notions of the nation-state as a collective body politic, a supraindividualized and anthropomorphized polity (Dumont 1970; Handler 1988; Parker et al. 1992; Young 1993). Indeed, the Russian word for state, gosudarstvo, builds on the gendered root nouns sudar’ and gosudar’, meaning, variously, tsar, emperor, king, herzog, prince, or member of the tsar’s family (Dal’ 1989:387). Notably, these well-known traditions formulate the nation as a mature male adult: this is especially common in nationalist discourses, where leaders and politicians announce themselves ready to assume the Hegelian burden of the “State of Reason” [most generously formulated in the “Sleeping Beauty” metaphor, prominently invoked in Russia and elsewhere, where the nation-state slumbers until being awoken by history (Gellner 1983; Suny 1993)]. By contrast, the play of youth and innocence in Tsereteli’s Disney-like monuments can be seen as part of a broader movement in Russian statecraft to deflect attention from the Soviet past, rather than directly wrestling with a Stalinist legacy that continues to inform absolutist thinking and postsocialist practices in the present.

Despite its productive commonalities with other postcolonial and postsocialist cases, there are important contours to consider for this particular Russian example. The tectonic political shifts in Russia at the close of the 20th century make any discussion of “the Russian state” unstable. Although states around the globe have never been the
unified actors that popular language practices make them out to be, the early years of post-Soviet Russia have seen a particularly trenchant fragmentation into hundreds of competing regions, minirepublics, breakaway cities, and immodest fiefdoms. By 1997 accounts, less than three percent of Russian citizens paid income taxes, while regional administrations from Siberia to the North Caucasus routinely withheld transfer payments from badly needed natural resource revenues as retaliation against the central government for close to virtual abandonment. Given this structural and financial fragmentation of the Russian federal system, I stress the emergence of a uniquely post-Soviet city-state, with its own local economies of politics and aesthetics. At the same time, with the tradition of Muscovite affairs so long at the center of Soviet life, this case is fertile ground for considering perceptions of the Russian state overall.

In this fragmented landscape, it would be easy to read Zurab Tsereteli's artful prosperity in elite Russian circles simply as evidence of corruption run amok. This is a particularly inviting track in a country that the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development declared to be the single most corrupt in the world (Reuters 1997). But generic understandings of corruption can also be deceptive in this context. Some Russia observers have argued that corruption and illegality have been at the center of economic and political life too long to be considered deviant or temporary (Shlapentokh 1996:401). Others have taken this idea in innovative directions by exploring the ways in which seemingly illegal transactions can be seen as richly constitutive, even moral gestures in a country where skepticism over the proprieties of state socialism degraded the very concept of the "official" (Ledeneva 1998; Rivkin-Fish 1999; Yang 1994). Accordingly, I want to move away from the enunciation of corruption by asking, instead, how perceptions of corruption are reconfiguring Russian state power. In an interesting essay on government corruption in India, Akhil Gupta articulates well this kind of approach (1995). Rather than following standard perceptions of corruption simply as "a dysfunctional aspect of state organizations," he asks how corrupt practices can also
be “a mechanism through which the ‘state’ itself is discursively constituted” (1995:376). Rather than resting at the inclusion of corruption in an expanded state profile, Gupta’s point is that the attention to corruption in the Indian context manages to keep the “imagined state” central in the public eye, indirectly buttressing its power, rather than diminishing it. This conjures the argument made by Abrams and others. The state is manifested as somehow being apart from the world of political practice.

The question of popular response to Tsereteli also underlines the importance of qualifying and challenging standard European notions of a “civil society” in changing cultural and historical contexts. The classic picture of an organically diversified set of civic organizations that speak truth willfully to official governments, conjoining personal engagement with larger political forces was, as many have observed, never evenly rooted in the Russian 20th century. At the outset, Russian civil society (grazhdanskoe obshchestvo) passed in almost a structurally seamless way from a tsarist vanguard of the elites to a Bolshevik vanguard of the intelligentsia (Stepanov 1997). Yet, it is also the case that Soviet Russia produced hundreds of forms of civic entitlement and local-level political “belonging,” by John Borneman’s phrasing, under the socialist rubric (Anderson 2000; Borneman 1992; Hann and Dunn 1996). The legacy of these diverse civic groupings has perhaps nowhere been better revealed than in the mass resistance to Tsereteli’s work. Leaders of Moscow art circles and the tens of thousands of citizens at large who signed petitions and organized demonstrations proved themselves a remarkably well-organized, lively, and clever political audience. This is far from the limiting stereotype of communism’s docile bodies. As a result, I underscore how today’s extremely sophisticated Russian public—having followed more than a decade of torrential political revelations, of ideologies betrayed, leaders incapacitated, monies gone awry, and histories run amok—is well prepared to join with Abrams, scrutinizing statecraft in its various manifestations. Few journalists, architects, and cultural critics, for example, have hesitated to challenge what Barthes might have called the naturalizing ambitions of these new monuments, or to recognize that monuments generally, to reprise the arguments made by Mitchell, are part of the “effects” of state power, composing a “realm of order that somehow stands apart from a world of practice” (1990:572). This remarkable readiness to identify state power as a political reality unto itself invites the larger question of whether “stateness” (gosudarst-vennost’) under the Soviet government was more evident to ordinary people than it is under established democracies.

Overly quick renderings of Western-style civil society would be equally out of place in an environment where protesters often relied on the Stalinist trope of liquidation, making it clear that the rhetoric of authoritarianism recasts itself ever anew. I want to pause here to consider the work of Russian critic Boris Groys, who has been among the more ardent writers diagnosing the persistence of Stalinist discourse in contemporary Russian art circles. In his work, Groys takes on some of the popular misconceptions about “unconventional” art generated in part by Roland Barthes’s classic distinction between “myths of the right” and “myths of the left.” In Mythologies, Barthes contends that the naturalizing or masking potentials of myth are primarily the province of the bourgeoisie or the upholders of the status quo. “One language which is not mythical,” he wrote, was that of the revolutionary avant-garde, or man the producer:

Wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links his language to the making of things, meta-language is referred to a language-object, and myth is impossible. . . . Just as bourgeois ex-nomination
characterizes at once bourgeois ideology and myth itself, revolutionary denomination identifies revolution and the absence of myth. [1993:146]

Groys’s dissatisfaction with this passage follows two streams. First, he argues that Barthes’s view of myth as a metalanguage, one that always defers to a “more real” object-language, oversimplifies and diminishes the transformative power of myth itself, be it to the left or the right. Barthes effectively splits the ideological from the material, rather than seeing them as necessarily mutually constitutive. Second, Groys saw in Barthes’s division into left and right, or “us versus them,” the kind of proto-Stalinist language of the early Russian revolutionary avant-garde. Yet, as Groys is keen to point out, these hugely influential avant-gardists, who so actively joined in the dramatic transformation of the defeated Russian empire, belonged to the class of revolutionary mythopoets whom Barthes sees as ineffectual.

If, contrary to Barthes, myth has to do with the creation and transformation of the world [a practice, rather than as a reflective, theoretical entity], then it is precisely the avant-garde and leftist politics that are mythological, since by casting the artist, the proletariat, the party, the leader in the role of demiurge, they provide for their natural integration into world mythology. [Groys 1992:117]

In this kind of analysis, Groys makes room for understanding Tsereteli’s work as its own mythopoesis, if not a brilliant one, regardless of how “noticeable” or unexpected it may be. Although few, if any, critics have chosen to identify Tsereteli with the early Russian avant-garde, Groys helps to clarify how Tsereteli’s monuments are, like labors of any political provenance, transformative. The point, then, is to see monuments and their mythical properties as a form of political practice itself, rather than as a metalanguage derived from hidden realities. They create new subject effects, new cognitions, and new forms of political legitimacy.

the artist and the controversy

Zurab Tsereteli was born in 1934 in Tbilisi, in the Soviet Republic of Georgia. At the age of 18, he entered the Tbilisi Academy of Arts, taking his first job a few years later with the Georgian Institute of Ethnography as their chief designer and illustrator. He soon developed a reputation as a talented artist outside the bounds of anthropology. It was Tsereteli’s first public commission in 1967, obtained through the influential Moscow architect Mikhail Posokhin, for a mosaic at a large Soviet resort on the Black Sea, in Pitsunda, that earned him early public attention (and soon after, the State Prize of the USSR). Subsequently, Tsereteli’s wife Inessa, of prerevolutionary Georgian nobility, came into a small fortune from distant relatives in France. By law, the couple paid out half the inheritance to the Soviet state, while Tsereteli invested the remainder to create his own multimedia studio for painting, sculpture, architecture, graphic art, and industrial design. Long before it was fashionable or legal, Tsereteli rose to the ranks of the Soviet rich, turning out project after project and becoming a local legend in Tbilisi by leaving behind 50-ruble tips in restaurants—roughly equivalent to half a month’s salary for most Soviets at the time (Lebedeva 1996; Lunina et al. 1997; Shvidkovskii 1994).

By the mid-1970s, Tsereteli was a major Soviet artist. In Georgia, he oversaw the interior design for the Palace of Trade Unions in Tbilisi, the famous Aragvi restaurant, and a children’s sanitarium on the Black Sea. In Moscow, he decorated the mammoth Armand Hammer International Trade Center, the Izmailovo Hotel, Hotel Sport, and the headquarters of the Ministry of the Defense. He also served as Chief Architect for the 1980 Moscow Olympics. He designed the Soviet embassies in Japan and Brazil,
as well as major sculptures in front of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) headquarters in Paris, the United Nations (UN) Crowne Plaza in New York, and corporate blocks in London. Among his many honors and offices, he has served as a People's Artist of the USSR, Russia, and Georgia; People's Deputy in the Soviet parliament; President of the Moscow branch of UNESCO; President of the Russian Society of Designers; and Academician in the Russian Academy of Sciences. No stranger to political life, Tsereteli served as Deputy Foreign Minister in the early 1990s under the authoritarian Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia. His closest and perhaps most important political tie has been his friendship with Yuri Luzhkov, the powerful, charismatic mayor of Moscow since 1992. Tsereteli became President of the Russian Academy of Arts in 1997 (Bode 1997b).

Though Tsereteli's creations have long been known for their brash, unpredictable style, public interest in his work heightened with his eleventh-hour entry into the planning of Moscow's Victory Park, a World War II memorial complex. At its opening in 1995, Tsereteli's enormous ensemble jolted many by its motley character. Inside the country's new premier World War II museum, Tsereteli surrounded a mammoth classical rotunda with corridors featuring experimental flowered mosaics. Bronze reliefs of medieval swords, 20th-century machine guns, and helmets stream down a central stair, as if in a torrent of molten metal. Outside, the park features a central obelisk topped by Nika, a 30-ton bronze Greek Goddess of Victory, with two archangels at her side. At the foot of the column is a replica of Tsereteli's "Good Defeats Evil" monument from the UN Crowne Plaza in New York, a monument to St. George (long appropriated as a Moscow icon) slaying the dragon. Other key installations include a small white Russian orthodox chapel, uncharacteristically constructed from enormous glass panels and numerous brass fittings, followed, finally, by a "Tragedy of the Peoples" monument installed at the park's entrance.
Surveying the park after its opening, the influential Russian architect Mikhail Tumarkin described his first impressions:

The exceptionally vague silhouette of the central [obelisk]—a black blob [pliukha] on a black mast, with what look like chicken legs hanging from the sides. What strikes the visitor most profoundly is the triumph of a typical new-Russian, Russian-Orthodox, mass cultural facade laid over the corpse of one of the last great gasps of socialism. . . . Patriotic Russian Orthodox symbols (a church, St. George) work in tandem with prestigious Western fetishes [veshchitsy] (Amazons, Nika) in a genetically Soviet space—signified by its enormous emptiness, lined by marble and granite for what are literally kilometers. The Trojan column, from its first days on the drawing boards of the design competition, has been transformed into a typical Soviet chisel, covered in quite non-classical, crude bas-reliefs. The goddess Nika has practically not one single flattering angle, and one can only be stupefied by the complexity of its precarious attachment to the obelisk. The face of St. George is obscured from vision to the visitor ascending the monument's central stair, leaving only a view of the stomach and genitals of St. George's horse. The serpent lying at the feet of St. George more closely resembles thickly sliced sausage, while from close range the monument as a whole turns out to be a decorative covering atop what is either the [adjacent museum's] central air unit or an electric substation. [1995:2]

Equally confusing to many visitors was "Tragedy of the Peoples," the grim monument to mass extermination at the entrance to the park, traditionally a site for wedding parties to take photos. The puzzlingly placed memorial drew such ire from Moscow crowds in its first year of existence that officials agreed to relocate it, at a cost of 3.5 million U.S. dollars, to a nearly hidden location next to the washrooms behind the park's museum. Commenting on the Victory Park complex as a whole, Anatoly Khazanov wrote, "Detached from the city and its inhabitants, it is actually an anti-memorial in which the victors are not properly respected, because instead of presenting them as ordinary people they have been turned into demi-gods, and the victims are not properly mourned because they have been presented as totally separated from living human beings" (1998:301). The same might be said for the "Tragedy of the Peoples" monument specifically, where the outsized portrayal of naked victims of fascism adopts the superhuman scale of totalitarian art celebrated by so many military regimes. By the fall of 1996, as Tsereteli's vertiginous homage to Peter the Great briskly rose from the banks of the Moscow river downtown, many came to see Victory Park as only a prolegomenon to the city's most dramatic transformations. Since 1992, clouds of dust and lurching construction cranes have set the city skyline in virtual motion, with the office of Mayor Luzhkov issuing fiat after fiat authorizing new public works amidst what many have called the biggest building boom in Russian history. With over 4.6 billion dollars of foreign investment pouring into Moscow in 1996 alone, the same year that Luzhkov returned to power for a second four-year term with 88 percent of the popular vote, the Mayor's Office firmly asserted itself as the exclusive channel through which all construction projects are approved.

To be sure, Luzhkov had much to inspect. The mammoth reconstruction of Moscow's Church of Christ the Savior, vaster than St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome and once the largest single space under one roof at the time of its demolition by Stalin in 1937, cemented the gestures of a new independent Russia toward historical renewal. The expenditures for the site (well past 250 million dollars), while far from completed at the time of the city's 850th anniversary in 1997, drew criticism for what many considered to be Luzhkov's panderings to the Russian Orthodox Church and nationalist public (Kudriashov 1998; Papernyi 1996; Smith 1997a, 1997b). The Manezh project,
the 82,000 square-yard underground business and shopping complex, whose location at the entrance to Red Square made it a key symbol of the city’s new capitalist turns, logged in, by one estimate, while still uncompleted, at 110 million dollars (Bennett 1996a; Iakusheva 1996; Stanley 1997).

For a politician whose jaunty, authoritarian style was clearly working among pollsters who regularly diagnosed the public’s desire for a firm hand, Luzhkov met some of his fiercest resistance from opponents of the towering Peter. Although a homage to Peter the Great, Russia’s most Westernizing tsar, had a certain ring to it in a new pro-European, postperestroikian age, scores of critics lampooned how it was that Moscow—the very city whose Byzantine cabals Peter detested so much as to relocate the empire’s capital to swampland 300 miles north in 1703—should erect a 20-million-dollar monument to its most famous detractor. Highlighting that the statue had been hastily commissioned at the request of the Russian Navy for the 300th anniversary of its founding, others asked how Peter came to be clad in the uniform of a Roman legionnaire, atop a ship’s deck no longer than the length of his feet, making him appear as if navigating a wash barrel, pointing skyward with a scroll most closely resembling a leg bone, among bronze flags welded, aflutter, in opposite directions (Filipov 1997; Smirnov 1997).

In its newfound solidarity against Tsereteli, Moscow’s vox populi may have taken some lead from people in Miami, Florida, who earlier considered building a close replica of the Peter monument, reincarnated as Christopher Columbus. Visiting Washington in October 1992 with Tsereteli at his side, Luzhkov unveiled a model of the Columbus statue, presenting it as a gift to the United States in honor of the Columbus quincentennial. Soon entangled in the web of American revisionist histories that questioned the appropriateness of a salute to the explorer who led a movement that brought so much suffering to native peoples, the Russian benefactors expressed particular
surprise at the cool reception to the monument itself. *Miami Herald* art critic Helen Kohen pronounced the proposed 311-foot-tall statue “graceless as a herd of brontosaurus...[and] configured in the shape of an exploded hydrant” (1992:1E). Many Floridians questioned how Tsereteli’s brand of art history had reached their particular shores, since Columbus had never been to the Miami area, nor did it figure in his recorded ambitions. In a final joust at the monument’s historical accuracy, Kohen dryly observed, “The master navigator is shown with one hand on a ship’s wheel, a steering aid that did not exist in his lifetime” (Kohen 1992:1E). Moscow’s Peter, downscaled to a more modest 15 stories from Columbus’s 30, and outfitted with a new head, soon found an equally stormy reception.

Peter the Great surely symbolized many things to the Russian public when completed in 1997, such as the spoils of power in a country well known for its elusive communist elites and post-Soviet corruptions. But I would also remark that the fantastic monument promoted a novel performance of renovated statehood through the infantilization of public space across the capital. From Tsereteli’s cartoonings of Peter rising 15 stories skyward in the virtual center of the city, to the ringing of the Kremlin with toy animals and neoclassical balustrades such that some Muscovites felt themselves to be in an outdoor extension of the city’s famous emporium, Children’s World [Detskii Mir], a hallmark of Stalinist architecture, everywhere the city’s new public spaces assert their moral innocence. “Many say that in the name of transforming Moscow, the mayor has eviscerated half the capital,” wrote Shcherbachenko.

But when the dust from the bulldozers and cranes settles, you will find something quite different, the city as children’s park. With banker’s gingerbread houses, cathedrals, churches and chapels from paper maché, underground shopping malls built like doll’s houses and Gullivers propped on pedestals... . . Not once in anyone’s memory, even from the 1980s Olympics, has the city changed so rapidly. [1997:24]

Some might contest such a reading of the singularity of rapid change around the Russian capital, since Moscow had long been at the center of the Soviet Union’s ambitions to recreate the world in the socialist image. From the 1920s onward, and particularly at the height of Stalin’s architectural campaigns, construction in the city proceeded everywhere and at a lightning pace. Even during the austerities of World War II, official newspapers chronicled how entire buildings, from apartment blocks to hospitals, continued to be in use while literally being on the move. “For the 1941 May Day celebrations,” one historian noted, “reporters described the delight of workers upon discovering that a protruding building had been rolled back overnight, so that their parade formations along Gorki Street [now Tverskaia] could proceed intact all the way to Red Square” (Castillo 1994:62; Papernyi 1996). Here I emphasize that what today echoes this Stalinist taste for grand performance is the increasing Disney-ization of public space by Russia’s premier theme park impresario. By recreating the world anew, Tsereteli’s work widely embraces a discovery of a new world that largely sets aside the Soviet age. To the same end, Tsereteli’s own public relations office often plays on his youthful demeanor and enthusiasm. Despite his decades of expertly cultivated influence over Soviet and Russian political circles of all stripes, he often presents himself as a naif to reporters, insisting that he does not understand Russian very well (Lunina et al. 1997:58).

Tsereteli’s wealth and prominence gained him opponents early on. Accusations over financial misdealings surrounded his very first installation in Pitsunda in the late 1950s but never reached trial. Since Luzhkov’s rise to power in 1992, Tsereteli has lived lavishly, by any Russian standards, in a Moscow mansion that, until 1991, housed
the West German Embassy. Luzhkov's decree titling the property to Tsereteli explains that the house was awarded in exchange for Tsereteli's concession of his home in Tbilisi for use as the Russian Embassy in Georgia. Tsereteli, however, did not own the building in Tbilisi, nor did the Russian Embassy ever move there. In 1993, Tsereteli's fortunes came under heightened scrutiny when customs officers in St. Petersburg opened shipping crates carrying another statue of Columbus as a gift to the city of Seville, Spain. Instead of Columbus components, inspectors found thousands of copper ingots, too soft for use in sculpture but normally used for electronic circuitry. Later investigators revealed that Tsereteli's holding company, "Kolumb," had contracted privately to ship 85,000 tons of copper (ten percent of Russia's then annual copper exports) out of the country. The case never came to trial (Lebedeva 1996:19; Lunina et al. 1997:61). Apart from his obvious ties to Luzhkov, others have drawn attention to the fact that Tsereteli donated 20,000 dollars to the construction fund of the Church of Christ the Savior immediately prior to winning the massive contract for the Church's main metalwork (Shcherbachenko 1996:28).

Responses to the Tsereteli controversy have taken a number of forms. Groups of artists began protesting around key Tsereteli sites in December of 1996. Later that month, Tsereteli answered in turn with a promotional media gambit on the Moscow City Council-sponsored television channel. Entitled, "A Telemarathon for Moscow's 850th Anniversary," the five-hour program was devoted almost entirely to Tsereteli and his work. Organizers had invited reporters, critics, and artists to the television studio to put questions to selected art experts designated as the "Panel of Conscience" (ploshchadka sovesti). At the last moment, however, producers announced that questions would only be entertained from a preassembled group of citizens lined up in a German specialty goods store across town. Despite evident attempts to screen all comers, one pensioner came to the microphone to express her concern that because Moscow had already lost its status as a UNESCO Heritage City as a result of the communists, surely the Kremlin would now lose its status as a UNESCO Heritage Site as a result of Tsereteli's new installations. "That's all, that's all, thank you, that's not necessary. We have a special clip prepared on that topic," interrupted the studio moderator, cutting off the elderly woman's microphone (Faibisovich 1997:78). The clip featured Tsereteli in his living room, surrounded by supporters. All present in the Tsereteli home agreed that opposition to his artwork was "reminiscent of Stalin's 1937 purges" and that "close-minded, reactionary" forces were inherently unable to accept Tsereteli's fresh approach to Peter the Great. Others observed that the Eiffel Tower, too, first met wide opposition. "The statue isn't finished yet," a final voice intervened. "One shouldn't be allowed to judge it" (Faibisovich 1997:79).

Although Tsereteli's supporters reminded viewers that the Eiffel Tower first startled the French by its futurism, Tsereteli's work appeared to trouble Muscovites far more deeply for its evocations of the darker sides to the Soviet past. For Groys, this was an era of "social magi and alchemists that the Russian avant-gardists aspired to become, and that Stalin actually was" (1992:120). From this perspective, the comparison between the renovated Manezh Plaza and the Stalinist architecture of Children's World would seem less and less to differentiate this post-Soviet rise of cartoon-like figures from high Stalinism's epoch of socialist realism. Although their styles may differ, both periods recall times of mammoth public works (and public art) projects exacted at huge costs to serve political entrenchment.

In January 1997, the capital's popular urban magazine Stolitsa enclosed anti-Tsereteli bumper stickers in all its issues, along with preprinted postcards to inundate Luzhkov by a mail-in campaign. In February, independent gallery owner Marat Gelman
spearheaded a group to take action through a public referendum. Managing to collect 100,000 signatures within three months in order to activate a formal vote, Gelman’s group put forth three questions:

1. Do Peter the Great, Tragedy of the Peoples and the Russian Fairy Tales installation in the Manezh Plaza spoil the look of the city?
2. Should all new public artworks be subjected to formal review by a commission?
3. Should these three of Tsereteli’s works be liquidated? [Medvedev 1997:2]

Referendum proponents added that these most controversial of Tsereteli’s works also challenged the perceived “sacrality” of their locations—the Moscow River, the World War II memorial park, and the Kremlin, respectively.

Keenly the populist, Luzhkov conceded that he, too, did not especially like the Tragedy of the Peoples memorial. Nor, he insisted, when he approved construction of the Peter the Great monument—so colossal as to require red warning lights to prevent aircraft from flying into it—did he expect it to be higher than seven meters tall. Nonetheless, he roundly resisted the proposed plebiscite, reluctant to spend the anticipated 12 million dollars to organize one in the name of “such a foolish squall with political overtones” (Degot’ 1997; Luzhkov 1997). Instead, Luzhkov appointed a special commission, including Gelman and the services of two public opinion agencies. As the pollsters set about their task, art and architecture specialists began appearing in the news with remarkable frequency, prolix in their denials that the monuments even merited comment.

Events took a violent turn in April 1997 when a group calling itself the “Worker-Peasant Red Army” bombed a ten-meter-tall statue of Tsar Nicholas II by sculptor Viacheslav Klykov in the quiet Moscow suburb of Tainsk. The move was a further blow to public accountability and due process where sculpture was concerned (Nezavisimaia Gazeta 1997; Skakunov 1997). Two weeks later, when a separate group called for the dismantling of yet another monument by Klykov, the imposing classical model of a horseback Field Marshall at the entrance to Red Square in 1994, an equally important issue was why so many incarnations of post-Soviet civil society continued to employ violence or repression as their main response to a flawed public sphere (Bode 1997a; Interfax 1997).

By May, the mayor’s commission announced its findings on Peter. While 40 percent of Muscovites called themselves “critical” of the monument, and a further 14 percent urged its dismantling, 46 percent of Muscovites confessed that they liked it. Tsereteli’s works would remain, despite the fact that the commission’s own chair admitted that over half of the voting members consisted of Tsereteli supporters and that the pollsters did not introduce the fact of the 20 million dollars expended toward the construction of Peter the Great alone. Marat Gelman proclaimed himself disappointed by what he described as the “not terribly demanding taste” of his fellow citizens, although many others suggested that Gelman’s successful insertion into the corridors of power (he became chair of the permanent commission to review public art in the capital) may have been his actual ambition in the first place (Gambrell 1997; Korchagina 1997; Mostovshchikov 1997; Segodnia 1997b).

the work of time

When Gorbachev rose to the head of the Politbiuro in 1985, he drew on the official language of state socialism to reconfigure, or perestroiti’, the Soviet system. In a few short years, newspapers across the country filled with the rhetoric of “accelerating and deepening” the reconstruction process (uskorenie i uglublenie perestroiki). Quick and
widespread parody was one of the many results, with shoppers insisting on the acceleration and deepening of matchstick production and television shows making comic turns on the words themselves. In the case of Tsereteli, there is a related kind of acceleration, where new monuments almost no longer need to be dismantled, finding themselves destroyed rhetorically even as, and sometimes before they are built. This is a notable departure from how monuments are supposed to “tell” people to gaze upon them (Musil 1987). But it also raises the very manner in which monuments, as manifestations of state power, have long played on images of timelessness and tranquility.

In his essay, “The Obelisk,” Georges Bataille discusses how, in the 1820s, King Charles X’s efforts to find an appropriate centerpiece for the Place de la Concorde, the famous site of the beheading of Louis XVI in Paris, led the French leader to thoughts of Luxor, where Egyptians were persuaded to bequest an obelisk, their symbol of military power and glory. “Seldom has a gesture of this type been more successful,” writes Bataille.

The apparently meaningless image imposed its calm grandeur and pacifying power on a location that always threatened to recall the worst. Shadows that could still trouble or weigh upon the conscience were dissipated, and neither God nor time remained. [1985:221, emphasis added]

It was this tranquilizing capacity of monuments, Bataille reasoned—their ability to freeze a moment in time for a projected eternity while the rest of the world sped along past them—that captured the ability of monuments themselves to act on their environments, to fuse subject and object.

In 1918, Vladimir Lenin sought to subvert precisely this anaesthetic effect by advocating that monuments become self-conscious scenes of active experiment. Urging that state monuments themselves be temporary, Lenin’s plan was that the constant shifting of new memorials, quickly executed and quickly mounted, would preempt the drive toward new political hagiographies. The transience of monuments would continually provoke the viewer, incite attention, and therefore stifle the auraticization of public art (Benjamin 1968). It was to be the first stage of the transformation of Moscow’s “grey squares,” as Lenin wrote, “into a living museum” (Bowlt 1978:192). Many artists were skeptical of the plan, not because of its practical implications but because Russia possessed only a minor sculpting tradition in comparison with its more considerable reputation across the arts. The most famous sculptors long had lived primarily abroad or were limited by the considerable expenses of metallurgy. Lenin soon grew indignant with the slow progress. In the first five years after the revolution, only 25 new monuments were erected in Moscow, with most of them, cast for quick and inexpensive installation in clay and plaster, rapidly deteriorating under the heavy winter snowfalls (Bowlt 1978:187). Soon, however, with the cult of Lenin sent spiraling after his death in 1924, and Stalin’s firm hold on power by 1929, heroes of the revolution were everywhere cast in stone. With the routinization of Soviet life that followed on the heels of World War II, all that was solid was certainly no longer meant to melt into air.

The defeat of the Leninist plan for the Soviet state to challenge continually its own presentation of self played into part of a greater Stalinist Zeitgeist that, in effect, denied the course of time itself. The perceived timelessness of monuments and their facility for arresting time came to have a special resonance across communist societies that subscribed to the Hegelian (if asymptotic) idyll of finally reaching the endpoint of history. When (class) struggle ceases, time stops.
For many, this signaled a Soviet public life working along a time-space axis that could be at once complementary and contradictory. For example, the Russian semiotician Mikhail Yampolsky most succinctly wrote that the construction of urban spaces under Stalin and Khrushchev was based on the opposition between (on the one hand) streets and avenues along which there is ceaseless movement of people and cars, and (on the other) squares adorned with monuments. Here movement is dried up into an immovable atemporality... Thus, the monument finds itself literally at the center of the totalitarian project, which, according to Hannah Arendt, is constructed as endless movement around an unattainable core. [1995:98]

In this light, despite a pronounced historical materialism by which the Soviet state required that all its scholars and artists “demonstrate a historical approach to reality” (Epstein in Berry et al. 1993:112), state planners expected that their monuments of script and stone should demonstrate that one part of the world, at least, had reached an age where time could be metered by statecraft (Fortes in Greenhouse 1996:29). In her work on symbolic economies in Ceaucescu’s Romania, Katherine Verdery makes related points over what she called the étatisation, or “statization” of time under socialism. “It must be remembered that socialist systems did not rest on the extraction of profits based in workers’ labor time,” Verdery writes.

“What can be, and I think should be, most productively taken from these thoughts on time recalibrated is a socialist (if not also capitalist) rhetoric of government’s ability to command the flow of life. In the late 1960s, by the time Leonid Brezhnev announced that the USSR had reached the period of “advanced socialism,” where nationality issues had been resolved in the name of a new historical community, upgrading the expression “Soviet people” from catachresis to historical fact, the struggle to reach history’s endpoint was held to be near complete. Decades before any possibility of the fall of the USSR, the Soviet state’s presentation was, by policy and in monument, one of strength, maturity, and advanced civilization.

states of innocence

On the one hand, the recent scrutiny of monuments across the former Soviet Union, particularly the efforts to challenge the works of Tsereteli before they were even completed, asserts a promising if awkward rebirth for a Russian civil society unified against enduring signs of the old regime. On the other hand, however, few countries have distinguished themselves so consistently over the course of the 20th century with a tradition of “creation by repression.” As old statues come down, and new ones become embattled only moments after they go up, it is equally persuasive to identify a pattern of one step forward, two steps back. Here I reiterate that Tsereteli’s most democratic detractors, from gallery owner Gelman to scores of petitioners, resorted to the classic Bolshevik strategies of pronouncing his works “incorrect” and subject to liquidation.

In this context, it would be remiss, I would argue, to let the Tsereteli controversy rest at the level of a newly entitled public’s aesthetic taste. Scores of dubious works of art and architecture have flooded the Moscow landscape since 1992, transforming the capital, in the words of one writer, “from a sad, post-Soviet mess to a glitzy, if vulgar metropolis often compared unkindly to Batman’s Gotham City” (Bennett 1996b).
Nor is the battle exclusively about historical propriety, in what Tsereteli’s opponents have decried as transgressions of hallowed Russian space. While visible from all angles, Peter the Great occupies surely the grayest and emptiest of the Moscow River’s downtown banks, closest in proximity only to the enormous, squat Red October chocolate factory and the disintegrating House of Artists exhibition hall. Moreover, for all of the nautical tsar’s dislike for the Russian capital, Moscow is the Russian city that now most blazes the Westernizing path Peter so long advocated. For its part, the transformation of the Manezh Plaza actually restores the square—known from 1967 to 1992 by a different name, 50th Anniversary of October Square—to its centuries’ old prerevolutionary function as a commercial market. The surprising introduction of fairy tale figures from Russian folklore inside the Kremlin’s Alexander Garden is, in turn, resonant in its bravado with the first postrevolutionary art experiments in the same spot almost eighty years ago. Futurists once took up Lenin’s call to challenge
bourgeois norms by painting the entire garden lawn a bright purple (Lur'e 1995; Prevost-Logan 1997).25

One Russian scholar who offers a vocabulary for considering Tsereteli's complex mix of time and space is the architectural historian Vladimir Papernyi. In a creative take on the dialectics of authoritarianism and experiment in Soviet society, Papernyi puts forth broad binary categories of "Culture One" and "Culture Two." At their most essential, Culture One expresses the fluidity and dynamism of the Soviet 1920s, "aspiring to the future and burning the path behind it," while Culture Two is the absolutist discourse of Stalinism, a world where "everything turns to stone." Although Culture One wants to manifest the future immediately, Culture Two prefers to keep it at a distance, transforming the world into eternity, preferring to focus its creative energies on the past (Papernyi 1996:41-73). Architecturally, Culture One's Leninist incarnation created an open-ended horizontality in the form of Konstantin Malevich's "Sleep Sonata," a low slung, cantilevered dormitory employing hydraulic foundations to literally rock its proletarian inhabitants to sleep (Starr 1978:178). The 1930s and postwar era of Culture Two, by contrast, betrayed a preoccupation with verticality, hierarchy, and authority, ringing Moscow with seven Stalinist Gothic skyscrapers, with their widely copied use of neoclassical columns and facades. As I noted earlier in regard to monuments, this second epoch marked the transition from experimental, temporary sculptures meant to turn Moscow into "a living museum," to a more ponderous tradition of eternal, ideal types rendered in marble and stone.26

In his binary tour of Soviet society, Papernyi joins with Lotman, Uspenskii, and others in arguing for the salience of deeply rooted dualisms in Russian culture, so much so that for Papernyi, Cultures One and Two essentially oscillate back and forth across the Soviet period—from Lenin to Stalin, Khrushchev to Brezhnev, and from Gorbachev's perestroika to the suggestion of a post-Soviet resurrection of authoritarian heights (Lotman and Uspenskii 1978:30-66; Papernyi 1996:94). Yet here, as in many other social contexts, the greatest relevance of such binary models is not in their separateness, but in the spaces over which they meet, contradict, and play off each other in political and economic practice (Bhabha 1997; Borneman 1992:4; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:5; Sahlins 1993:13). In this context, Tsereteli most clearly emerges as an emblem of the complex negotiation of past and present in Russia's latest regime change.27

At one level, it is easy to see Tsereteli's work as continuing certain aesthetic traditions of the Stalin era. From the neoclassical balustrades ringing the Manezh Plaza, to the vertiginously outsized scale and crushing weight of his monuments, the most celebrated artist of the late Soviet period everywhere provides state-sponsored visions of hierarchy and power. At times, defenders have tied his work favorably to the surge in Russian nationalism, as when Lev Kolodnyi compared the importance of Tsereteli's Peter to Russia's nuclear submarine fleet and anti-Islamic campaigns on the Central Asian borders (Kolodnyi 1996:5). But the links to an absolutist tradition are perhaps plainest in Tsereteli's well-known allergy to criticism. This might seem an awkward stance for a prolific artist many regard as a veritable grafoman (someone addicted to drawing) who includes among his favorite credos Gustave Doré's pledge, "I will illustrate everything!" (Shvidkovskii 1994:3; Travkin 1997).29 As culture critic Svetlana Boym has noted, "Although iconographic, Stalinist art is not made for interpretation; it is extremely suspicious of interpretation [or] any attempt at individual comprehension instead of shared experience. And one of those experiences is fear" (1994:39). Such resistance to interpretation is part of what ensures the viability of "the state idea," as Mayfair Yang has suggested in her work on postsocialist China. "Although the state
serves as an idea or totem for the expression and protection of social wholeness, it
does so through a culture of fear which treats it as a sacred entity, as an entity with an
awesome unity and a will of its own” (1994:21).

The closing of the Manezh Plaza to social protest and the rise of towering monu-
ments to state power and corruption provoke the chill of recognition in the minds of
many Muscovites, but even the most cursory glance at the crowds surrounding Tsere-
тели’s handiwork indicates that, by perverse contrast, Tsereteli’s monuments are
equally about fun. The Manezh Plaza’s new cast of fairy tale figures has been im-
mensely popular with Muscovite families, a success that one might predict also for
Tsereteli’s forthcoming “Wonder Park.” Indeed, amidst cinematically colossal car-
toon characters rising from the river, ship’s sails unfurled in opposite directions, fairy
tale creatures at the Kremlin’s gate, and one of the world’s largest cathedrals rising,
phoenixlike, from the ashes of its demolition only 50 years previous, Moscow’s new
monuments conjure a dreamworld of storybook imagination. In turn, the theme park
impresario has created Peter the Great as Peter Pan, one of the few if only monuments
to the Russian Tsar as a young man, as if a fresh purchase on childhood for a country
starting out anew.

In considering this stratagem of innocence as part of the post-Soviet political
imaginary, one can also think of this kind of monumentality as both a detour around
questions of Soviet accountability after the fall of the USSR, as well as a deferral of ex-
pectations for a rise in standards of governance and standards of living among many
Russian citizens who long saw themselves as excluded from the dividends of 20th-
century economic growth. Tsereteli’s storybook castings project a stable, if absurdist
tranquility in the midst of Russia’s decidedly un-tranquil social torsion. Detour and
deferral are both variations on the theme of difference, which Derrida treated so thor-
oughly in his etymologies of the French différe, or the Latin diffère. The latter suggests
“the action of putting off until later” as well as “an economic calculation, a detour, a
delay, a relay, a reserve, a representation” (1982:8). It also, most notably, buys time.

_Différe_ in this sense is to temporize, to take recourse, consciously or unconsciously,
in the temporal or temporizing mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplish-
ment of fulfillment of ‘desire’ or ‘will,’ and equally effects this suspension in a mode
that annuls or temporizes its own effect. [Derrida 1982:8]^{30}

Here, in the study of language, is the same dynamic that Musil spoke of earlier for
monuments. With their ability to preside over enormous urban squares, pacifying the
swell of time and space around them, they are concretely present, and yet, absent—
“conspicuously inconspicuous.” The same might be said for statecraft.

Although Musil spoke of monuments that mark great events in history, moments
in a distant past, Tsereteli’s renderings of Russian fairy tale life also suggest distant futures.
In this respect, I find almost a reversal of vectors from the argument Johannes Fabian
made about anthropology’s “denial of coevalness” (1983). Surveying a century of an-
thropological writing, Fabian found that what a handful of competing methodological
approaches had in common was their ability to distance the subjects of study in time
and space. The political import is that when anthropological subjects are made out to
be living “in a different time,” readers have no guide to the complex workings of a
global political economy that subsumes all peoples of the world in its purview. Ethnologi-
cally, these post-Soviet efforts to create distance and buy time for the metropole are
an unusual displacement of the strategy early state planners long ago directed toward
the non-Russian peoples of the former USSR. Across the Soviet north, for example,
early Soviet anthropologists long documented the lives of Siberian indigenous peoples as
a predicament of "primitive communists" who were lost in the world of the tsarist regime (Grant 1995; Shternberg 1999; Slezkine 1994). As northern development and the embrace of non-Russian peoples stalled, however, the spirit and promise of 1917 was stretched further and further. In some cases, even 40 years after the October Revolution, "every new wave of reforms and almost every new trip of reformers to the North, was staged as the first Sovietisation" (Ssorine-Tchaikov 1999:5). This too was a vision of social order that sustained itself only by its constant deferral. By contrast, in the case of Tsereteli, I would argue that Moscow's new fairy tale monuments precisely "buy time" for their political clients by invoking their own denial of coevalness with the life of the capital around them. Whereas Verdery showed how the Romanian socialist government went about "seizing labor time" in austerity programs designed to ease the country's international debt (1996:43), Russia's monuments suggest a different kind of purchase. These state-sponsored gestures inhabit or commercialize an always earlier, more innocent time in the absence of significant economic or political improvements across social strata.

If, however, Tsereteli's repertoire suggests a strange mix of corruption and cheer, mediocrity and boldness, or fear and fun, he moves closer to the dark sides of Alice in Wonderland or the Brothers Grimm than to the world of Peter Pan. With their nightmarish episodes and burlesque twists, Alice's adventures just as surely might have led her to Tsereteli's "Tree of Fairy Tales," perhaps the most Gothic, threatening (and dangerous) children's monument ever to be placed in a public zoo. Although many journalists commented on the crudely constructed "Tree of Fairy Tales" installation, with its "homicidal leer" and its resemblance to "a pack of wild dogs," zoo officials were most concerned that the profusion of legs, horns, and wings invited small children to ascend the monument's sharp face. When Tsereteli refused the installation of a protective fence, the zoo hired an automatic weapon-toting guard continually to encircle the colossal column, looking for would-be climbers (Startsev and Gorshkov 1997; Zhukov 1997). Like Alice herself, Tsereteli emerges as a protagonist who is, in the words of one Lewis Carroll scholar, "both childlike and shrewd" (Gregory 1960:v). If at times he plays the naif, he is not without considerable means. Today, in a post-Soviet cosmos where the discourse of the future is the unsteady promise of capitalism's high modernism with its own mythic narratives of a totalizing response to the problems of the everyman, Tsereteli's message is the anodyne of timeless youth.

conclusion

I have suggested that state practices of detour or deferral are particular means of exonerating both past and present. I have been careful not to present this as a conscious strategy on the part of Moscow officials, yet the very reluctance to contemplate artful tactics in the raising of monuments is itself telling. It speaks to their success as political tools. Do I think that the Mayor of Moscow saw all this in Tsereteli when he hired his longtime friend to decorate the Russian capital? Surely not. But I would also point out that the disposition of tens of millions of tax dollars in a time of deep privation lends weight to the interpretations offered here. The political scientist George Kateb addresses this element of intent when he writes of American life that political actors "tacitly demonstrate an, as it were, innocent preference for, or love of, certain things despite the high moral cost" (2000:6). As with new Moscow monuments, this obliges an exploration of "the power of unaware and unrationalized aestheticism to move people to act with an apparent innocence" (Kateb 2000:6). This should also invite a rethinking of what counts as empiricism in any ethnography of politics, when the
complex play of deeply rooted cultural forms, political capital, and new subject effects makes the very question of intent dissolve into an array of narrative accountings.

I observed that these kinds of deferrals are a popular strategy of nationalist leaders in general to emphasize their humble origins. In Russia, I might also venture a motivation on the part of the mayor to approve new public art that lays to rest a legacy of decades of authoritarian rule. Hence, by contrast to the Soviet period, I find an embrace of the infantilizing, childlike state rather than its condemnation. This suggests a creative denial of coevalness now directed positively toward a new Russian public sphere, rather than pejoratively, as so often in the past, toward its errant non-Russian citizens. It is a remarkably original reversal for a country whose earlier Soviet incarnation strove so insistently to showcase its conquest of culture over nature—in the electrification of the countryside, the diverting of entire rivers, or the Russification of more than a hundred non-Russian peoples in the former USSR.

Tsereteli's pivotal role in realizing a new Russian "state idea" is particularly appropriate for someone who so long personified the complexities and contradictions of the Soviet system. Here I have offered that by going beyond this general frame of understanding state power, it becomes clearer how specific strategies of innocence act creatively in a troubled landscape. Tsereteli's uniquely fresh, fairy tale readings of the Russian world offer new lives for old. For an economically struggling country where presidents now disco dance for assembled crowds at election time (as a jacketless Yeltsin did in the summer of 1996 in St. Petersburg), or where the capital's former communist mayor designed and marketed his own perfume (as Iurii Luzhkov did with his new fragrance, Mer, in 1997), Stalin's perverse 1935 pronouncement that life was becoming "merrier" takes on a special evocative resonance.

Whether this message is one that serves its political clients well is a question of endurance. Parisians did indeed first recoil at the sight of the Eiffel Tower, and Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty suffered the derision of the American public for decades after being inaugurated in 1887, an opposition that ebbed only gradually when new generations of immigrants began romanticizing the landmark as their own symbol of innocence, the promise of new beginnings. But with events of the last decade having left huge portions of the Russian population economically ravaged and politically disenfranchised, Tsereteli faces one of his toughest audiences yet. Monumentality may need new forms to go before a public trained by events of the last decade to identify power not with something behind the mask, to return to Abrams, but as the work of the mask itself, as a centrally transformative form of power rather than simply its adornment. To view monuments such as these simply for their "artlessness" misses the very artful ways by which these state-sponsored public works manage to assert themselves as outside the political realm, at the same time as they create it.

notes

Acknowledgments. Research for this project began at the Institute for Advanced Study of the Russian State University for the Humanities, Moscow, where I was a Visiting Scholar in 1997. I am grateful for their remarkable support then, as well as in subsequent visits. Earlier renderings of this article were presented in colloquia at Brown, Rice, Cornell, Colgate, Hawai‘i, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. For their generous comments and readings, I thank David Abramson, Jean-Vincent Blanchard, John Borneman, Nana Borodatova, Farha Ghannam, Lisa Hajjar, Cindy Halpern, Julie Hemment, Aidyn Jebrailov, Anne Meneley, Ol'ga Murashko, Rachel Moore, Serguei Oushakine, Adriana Petryna, Tat’iana Pika, Nancy Ries, Michele Rivkin-Fish, Julie Taylor, Ol’ga Vainshtein, Robin Wagner-Paciﬁci, and four anonymous AE reviewers.
1. As Reumann (1997) notes, it is relevant that Anatolii Chubais, the then lead reformer in Yeltsin’s cabinet who urged him to speak out against Tsereteli’s work, had been a prominent opponent of Mayor Luzhkov. Allesandra Stanley (1997) discusses the Chubais/Luzhkov feud in her profile of Luzhkov.

2. For more on questions of accountability and forms of retributive justice across the former Soviet bloc, alongside Russia’s relative reluctance to recognize socialist-era excesses, particularly in the legal realm, see Borneman 1997. For more on Russia’s economic and political problems of the recent transition period, see Kramer 1998, Shlapentokh 1996, and Varese 1997.


4. Readers familiar with Russian public spaces will note the construction of several monuments around Moscow that share with Tsereteli’s monuments the characteristic of immensity. Perhaps the most interesting comparison is the house-sized model of Dostoevskii that now amply fills the long deserted square at the entrance to the Russian National (formerly Lenin) Library. As a scribe of darkness and underground life, Dostoevskii is hardly the subject of fairy tales. But Dostoevskii’s undeniably un-Soviet pedigree, along with the fantastic scale of the actual monument’s proportions, resonates with the theme of the “distant fantastic” I explore here. A clearer counterpoint, by contrast, would be Shemiakin’s relatively diminutive Peter the Great in St. Petersburg. My goal is to examine Tsereteli as one of many performances of state power at work in Russia today. I am grateful to Serguei Oushakine for drawing out these and a handful of other examples.

5. Aretxaga rightly notes:

   For Abrams, to treat the state as anything other than a mystifying mask that must be uncovered is to contribute to the reification of power relations. Yet by dismissing the state as the smoke screen of the “really real” relations of power, Abrams may fall prey to the same reification he tries to counteract, this time by endowing relations of power with a materiality separated from ideological or phantasmatic reality. [2000:52-53]


7. For more on the historically situated gendering of the Russian state as Fatherland or Motherland, see Cherniavsky 1961.

8. In the same year, the Heritage Foundation ranked Russia 117th in a list of 150 countries, based on regulation of trade policies, taxation, privatization, property rights, and the black market (Varese 1997:579).

9. I am grateful to Adriana Petryna, as well as an anonymous AE reader who, noting Barthes’s absence in an earlier draft of this article, directed me to Groys’s excellent study of Stalinist art (1992).

10. A year later, critic Mikhail Shcherbachenko echoed Tumarkin by suggesting that the obelisk resembled a formless spike [bulavka], the dragon at its base looked like chopped herring, and the goddess Nika bore “the face of drunken soldier” (1996:28). For more on the history and opening of the park, see Williams 1995:A2. For a formal interpretation of St. George in Christian and Islamic traditions, see the entry for “Georgii,” in Tokarev 1987:275–277 and Vyglogov 1985.

11. The monument, rumored to have begun as a rejected holocaust memorial for a site in the Israeli desert before the Israeli government declined it (the first of the 16 tablets pledging memory of human suffering is in Hebrew), required the support of Tsereteli’s colleague at the Russian Academy of Arts, its since deceased President Nikolai Ponomarev, to gain approval. For a detailed discussion of opposition to the statue, see Kolodnyi 1997. The semiotics of Russian iconicity, with its long tradition of presenting the tragic and the heroic, could well be applied to a study of the “Tragedy” monument, as well as to the new rendering of Peter the Great in a post-Soviet context. Nonetheless, I chose not to dwell on questions of iconicity at length given the overall direction of Tsereteli’s repertoire, which most prominently embraces the darker realms of the fantastic and the grotesque, such as in the “Tree of Fairy Tales” installation in the Moscow
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Zoo, the animal figures in Manezh Square, and Tsereteli’s plans for “Wonder Park.” To this I would add even the rimming of the “Tragedy” monument with grinning bronze rabbits, representing the toys of children who were lost in concentration or labor camps. Caroline Humphrey noted the risk in dwelling overly on iconic and archetypal moments in her discussion of the work of Russian critic Gennadi Revzin, whose emphasis on architectural style versus architectural iconicity created an impression of “wholes and elements carrying meaning, as if no one gave such meaning, and no one ever misunderstood them” (1997:97-98). I am grateful to an anonymous AE reader for raising this issue. Dollar amounts here and in subsequent passages are in U.S. currency.

12. Foreign critics surveyed the Russian Gulliver and missed few beats. Art in America described the artwork as “a lunky, overbearing construction that has been likened to a big toy soldier stuck atop a bunch of broken model ships” (Gambrell 1997:27). The New York Times crisply observed that Peter united “Soviet monumentalism with some of the kitsch of the Pirates of the Caribbean ride at Disney World” (Stanley 1997).

13. Steering wheels of the type Tsereteli used in both the Columbus model and the Peter the Great monument were invented in the early 1700s, more than 200 years after Columbus’s voyage of 1492. Fred Guardabassi, an official with Miami’s quincentenary committee in 1992, added that the ship itself did not represent caravels of its period (Miami Herald 1992). By 1993, Cleveland, Ohio, Columbus, Ohio, and Columbus, Georgia were among the cities vying for the rejected monument. In 1997, Tsereteli negotiated with Donald Trump to locate a taller version of the Miami monument in New York City’s harbor (Agence France-Presse 1997; Segodnia 1997a). Adding further irony to the Tsereteli controversy, as well as testimony to the tourist appeal of outsized attractions, officials in Tsereteli’s native Republic of Georgia; along with Greenwich, England, which Peter the Great visited in his tour of England and Amsterdam in the late 1600s; the British town of Deptford; and the town of Royan on the French Atlantic coast all made formal offers to take the Moscow statue, should it be dismounted (Segodnia 1997c). One French journalist wrote, “Bombed by mistake in WWII, will [Royan] once again fall victim to architectural aggression?” (Reumann 1997:2). In 1998, the city of Cátano, Puerto Rico agreed to erect the Columbus statue (Navarro 1998).

14. Maintaining that other commitments distracted him from plans to erect Columbus in the United States, Tsereteli dismissed opposition from Native American communities.

A few Indians began to object to a monument to the discoverer of America. They were saying, you know, he enslaved them. Seven Indians—is that your idea of a complication? I went to the picketers and I asked them what they wanted. They started to haltingly tell me about why they didn’t like Columbus. I answered, “Who’s saying that it’s a monument to Columbus?” It’s a monument to the New World and the new man who was born there. And in the second place, if you don’t like Columbus, why are you living in a city called “Columbus”? [Vanchenko 1996:12-13]

15. Khazanov also observes that the renovations of Manezh Square “give the area a Disneyland-like appearance” (1998:290). For a thoughtful analysis of Disney’s public ethos, see Fjellman 1992. Perhaps the most literal child-meets-city-as-playground installation in post-Soviet Moscow is the recent sculptural ensemble of infants at play atop Roman ruins in Moscow’s Rimskaia metro station.

16. In the summer of 1998, I made a handful of attempts to interview Tsereteli, whose reluctance to engage either the press or curious scholars was by that time well cultivated. One afternoon when I visited his elaborate studios in the former West German embassy, one of his long-time publicists reminded me of the gestures and melodrama of Nora Desmond as she described Tsereteli’s legendary energy:

When Zurab was finishing up the Victory Park project in 1995, we were all concerned for his health. He had been up night after night on site making sure that everything was done. One morning he had a meeting with the Mayor but hadn’t even gone to bed the night before. He came in from the site, took no more than half an hour to go upstairs, lie down, and change. When Zurab came down the stairs, we all gasped. He was like the Sun!
17. Tsereteli's uneven command of Russian was most publicly highlighted during the October 1998 exhibition of the artist's smaller sculptures and paintings. One prominent work was a bronze tableau, "Desnitsa velikogo mastera" (The Grand Master's Right Hand). Depicting Mayor Luzhkov's famously proletarian cap alongside an artist's hand grasping a chisel, the work is an emblem of Tsereteli's close working relationship with the charismatic politician. It seemed only a linguistic complication that the hand in the sculpture was not actually right (desnitsa) but left (Kommersant Daily 1998).

18. Another group of students passed out bread at the foot of Tsereteli's much maligned monument to Russian-Georgian Friendship on Moscow's Tichinskaia Square, shouting, "Bread, not Circuses!" For more on the Russian-Georgian Friendship monument, see Lebedeva 1996:18.

19. The main objection was that Klykov's monument, portraying Field Marshall Zhukov on his horse in the World War II Victory Day march, features the horse holding its tail at a near horizontal pitch, something that horses cannot do at high speeds, let alone while ambling on parade. See Khazanov 1998:302–303 for a fuller consideration of the Klykov monument.

20. For a parallel discussion of the denoticing of state-sponsored culture in St. Petersburg, see Yurchak 1997.

21. The Egyptian obelisk is 75 feet tall and 3,300 years old, given to Charles X by Mohamed Ali, Viceroy of Egypt, in 1829. Ali later offered "Cleopatra's Needle" to Queen Victoria. For more on Bataille and the Place de la Concorde, see Hollier 1974.

22. Yampolsky's (1995) is arguably the best study of Russian monuments in the Soviet period. The literary critic Katerina Clark echoed Yampolsky's sentiment when she wrote that "in the 1930s, the city of Moscow functioned as a kind of hyperspace that had transcended time and was hence of a different order of reality" (1995:302). Following this theme, Mikhail Epstein took a greater and perhaps more functionalist leap when he wrote:

In Russia, you always had the tendency to substitute space for time. The more enormous our space dimensions became, the less we were historical, the less accurate could be our sense of time. . . . No time at all. Despite which, the dominant ideology was thoroughly historicist, demanding of artists, of writers, that they demonstrate a historical approach to reality. So they tried to imitate history, to create simulacra of a history that didn't exist—didn't exist because it was pure space. [Epstein in Berry et al. 1993:112]

For more on monuments during the Soviet period, see Ashton 1995.

23. Stephen Hanson (1997) has made a more specific argument for time as a guiding theme of socialist power in his excellent book.

24. In the case of Tsereteli, Reumann makes the optimistic case for a rebirth of civil society the most prominently (1997:2). By contrast, Irina Antonova, director of Moscow's prestigious Pushkin Museum argues that average citizens had a greater say over public artworks in the Soviet period (Korchagin 1997:16). For a fuller treatment of the traditional understanding of civil society in Russia, see the entry for grazhdanskoe obshchestvo in Stepanov 1997:545.

25. Historical fidelity in urban art and architecture is, under any circumstance, a process of choice from among periods and actors, as Handler's discussion of the restoration of Quebec City's Place Royale ably demonstrates (1988:140–158).


27. While I find Papernyi's distinction between Culture One and Culture Two useful for underlining popular perceptions of changing Soviet art and architecture, his distinction contrasts with Groys's insistence that the work of the revolutionary 1920s was an essential preface to the rise of Stalin's "Culture Two" (Groys 1992). In this regard, it is notable that Tsereteli frequently identifies Konstantin Malevich, one of the revolutionary painters Groys binds to the later Stalinist engineers of human souls, as his favorite Soviet artist. For a fuller discussion of the revolutionary roots of Stalinist culture, see Clark 1995.

28. Tsereteli's extensive participation in the resurrection of the Church of Christ the Savior is more frequently cited as evidence of his conservative nationalist brio (Smith 1997b).
29. The one time I talked at any length with Tsereteli, his staff had invited me to his office to set a date for possible interview times (later postponed). I sat on one of three couches facing his desk, the other two occupied by a silent, smiling man in dark sunglasses and a Russian Orthodox priest who made a sign of the cross and uttered invocations to Christ each time Tsereteli spoke. Tsereteli carried the conversation without once looking from his notepad, vigorously, if mechanically, filling page after page with dozens of drawings.

30. For more on Derrida and time, see Spivak 1976:xliii. For more on deferral and space, see Derrida 1976:166.

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accepted June 28, 2000
final version submitted August 28, 2000

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