

The icebreaking *Lenin*

by Simon Mraz, curator of the exhibition *Lenin : Icebreaker*

A creed

Art occupies space, something there is no shortage of in Russia. Nowhere else on Earth is there more opportunity to go so far and to venture so deep into the essence of things, given the country's vast expanses and its cultural diversity. There is, for one, the geographically conditioned altercation between west and east, north and south, through the ties of history that has both gathered the country together or allowed it to drift apart. Over the course of less than a hundred years it has torn state and society apart through elementary political upheavals, through major contradictory visions of an ideal society, through wars and avant-garde movements (we are possibly currently experiencing yet another) with an intensity and a force unparalleled anywhere else – only to ultimately put it all back together again.

Art is not the background music to social development; rather, it calls the tune. By capturing and illustrating the world the way it is and how it is about to become the artist in his work all too often pre-empt what the technocrat aims to change.

Art makes sense and contributes just as crucially to the cultural environment that is just as necessary for life as economic and political factors or those of technological progress.

Contemporary artistic output is the lifeline of current cultural life; it is an intellectual challenge, sustenance for the mind, the heart and the soul. Just as we nurture the treasures of any cultural legacy, we must bear in mind that all we admire today about the great masters of our cultural history was once the daring contemporary artistic output of another age. These great cultural traditions can only be maintained if we provide the optimum outline conditions and the freedom for today's artists.

The regions clearly illustrate just how essential that stimulus is, from both a positive and a negative point of view. Today it is perhaps not so much a question of discovering unknown corners of the world than of making sure that those corners of the world are not lost. It takes jobs; it takes infrastructure; but above all it takes culture. Cities without a vibrant cultural life anchored in the present and orientated towards the future offer little in the way of incentive for young people to stay, given the degree to which they are networked internationally and their levels of mobility. Conversely, an extensive cultural life makes not just for an intellectual and enjoyable variety; it also has the potential of being a key factor for a young, modern city's self-image.

Young people are supposedly drawn to the world's major conurbations; but it doesn't have to be that way. The regions, the "provinces", can also provide a nurturing soil that sustains the wealth of the city, in both material and intellectual terms. And that is precisely where we intend to go with our projects, particularly our current one: discovering places in the company of artists, places which do not simply absorb art, but allow art to flourish as a result of their specificity, their history and their monuments,

inspiring artists, proposing themes which make the past and the legacy preserved from it so tangible in the present that it becomes an opportunity for artistic work.

Outstanding venues are a good match-up with outstanding artistic output. And the *Lenin* icebreaker and Murmansk are certainly such a venue.

The *Lenin*: more than a ship, more than an exhibition venue

Certainly, an outsider, a landlubber who might only just be familiar with the more readily conceivable lake landscape (for all its beauty) of their homeland, can only begin to understand a ship such as the *Lenin* icebreaker, and what it stands for. The ship itself, its history and its fitments, and not least its complement, certainly make an incomparable impression on even the most unprepared visitor.

As the first civilian nuclear-powered ship, as a modern icebreaker, it is a marvel of engineering, a pioneer that opened up Arctic routes, a manifestation and showcase of Soviet progress, a work of art with all its original equipment, a monument and museum accessible to the public.

The ship itself is worthy of many labels. In its long and impressive history it has experienced many great moments and played host to a whole raft of high-ranking personalities: alongside Soviet state leaders people such as Fidel Castro, Richard Nixon and Yuri Gagarin, whose name is inseparably linked with the Soviet Union's space programme, like the *Lenin* icebreaker a milestone of technological progress.

For a good ten years now this proud vessel has been at anchor in its home port; its nuclear propulsion elements have been removed, and as the city's main attraction it is open to the general public. The *Lenin* icebreaker has no more lost its soul than it has its captain, its dedicated crew and – from an art history point of view – the high standard of fitments and furnishings of its representative premises, not to mention the impressive engine rooms with their original equipment and technical sophistication. The *Lenin* is a work of art in its own right, which is why part of this publication is given over to photographic documentation.

In any case the *Lenin* is more than a ship now in retirement; it has earned its place in shipping history and its place as a showcase of Soviet progress – with all the dramatic staging that entails. The *Lenin* tells the story of supposedly unstoppable progress in a new world order and was itself proof positive of its realisation.

And then there is another, very intimate aspect, one which leads into another world. It is an aspect that would remain inaccessible to the visitor if the vessel in question were simply a museum ship. However, the *Lenin* has its captain, a chief engineer (who is also featured as an artist in our project with his stunning photographs taken in the 1970s), and a crew. The seamen who live and lived on the ship are somehow organically linked with it. Or rather, it appears that they are linked across the decades with those pioneers, to a time when man and machine depended on one another, living among the eternal ice on missions that often lasted many months, without any contact with the outside, in an environment that is as breathtakingly beautiful as it is hostile to all life. In this situation the correlation is quite different, with man experiencing machine as a being, something that is still palpable to this very day. For those who spend their lives on board ship, its creaking and groaning and the array of different noises made by the machines and the engines are a highly individualized experience. No two ships are the

same: each has its own specific noises, its specific history, and its soul. For the crew serving on the icebreaker today it is not merely a place of work; it is an auratic place.

The *Lenin*, then, is more than just some ship, and it is certainly more than just another cool exhibition venue.

The ship in the eyes of the artist

The *Lenin* is no lifeless White Cube, no backdrop to something decorative, and no place of superficial chit-chat; rather, it is a place where art has the opportunity to open up new prospects and perspectives as it engages responsibly and respectfully with those who guard this particular grail.

Prospects because the *Lenin* icebreaker once stood at the forefront of innovative developments and now, in 2013, as part of a major international art project, is once again among the pioneers bringing contemporary Russian and international art to the Russian regions, true to the spirit alluded to in the opening paragraph to this article.

The project also opens up perspectives because the works created by the artists specifically for this place blend in with its aesthetic appearance as they engage with the diverse aspects of the ship itself. Original substance and new artistic output are interlinked and correlated. The *Lenin* provides a home base for art; the *Lenin* is an opportunity and an occasion for artistic output. The works created here allow a new look at the original.

The nuclear propulsion elements have been removed from the *Lenin* icebreaker; art is no nuclear reactor, but as a driving force it does generate the momentum needed to give the *Lenin* a new surge of power as it sets off on this new voyage, taking it to places and territories to which even this ship has never before ventured.

Long live the *Lenin*; long live art!