

Title: Passion and Irony Intertwined: Eroticism in the Perestroika-Era Poetry of Nina Iskrenko
Olga Livshin, Northwestern University

When the taboo on sexuality in public speech and writing was lifted in the USSR at the end of the 1980s, erotica and pornography flooded the market. Writers, directors and performance artists embraced the explosive potential of expression about this sphere of life. In this cultural landscape, Nina Iskrenko stands out as a contradiction: her response to the late Soviet fascination with sexuality is tinged with both enthusiasm and irony. In her work, sexual description destabilizes the functioning of key Soviet symbolic political sites and is involved in questioning the legitimacy of iconic political figures. Moreover, Iskrenko uses desire to debunk grand scientific and technological ambitions that are characteristic of the ideology of the modern nation-state. However, the author treats ironically the Soviet media's sensational representations of private desire. She also creates grotesque parodies of larger-than-life representations of male desire in erotica and on television. How do we account for this contradiction?

While Iskrenko uses sexuality to react to her contemporary political situation, confronting the Soviet state, her work also has an element of social criticism that had been shaped in dialogue with tradition. Following the OBERIU poets and the Lianozovo school, both of which influenced her poetry, Iskrenko explores the limits of eroticism. Like her predecessors, she pushes narration to the boundary of the believable and the conventionally tasteful, jolting the reader out of social, moral and poetic convention. Iskrenko provokes the reader to interrogate the legitimacy of rigid gender roles and sexual sensationalism. She also treats with irony the lack of reflection in individuals who turn to sexual freedom as a source of optimism. To summarize, sexuality in Iskrenko's Perestroika-era poetry is used not only to resist an authoritarian state and its prohibitions, but also to renew the tradition of regarding eroticism itself as subject matter bound by accepted ideas and cultural conventions.