

Title: The Soviet Readymade: Everyday Life in the SZ Group's "Self Defense Against Things"
Author: Nadia Hoppe, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Abstract:

In 1917, Marcel Duchamp submitted a urinal signed "R. Mutt" as artwork to the Society of Independent Artists' inaugural exhibition, only to be rejected under the claim that his "Fountain" was indecent and not a work of art. Decades later, the toilet as art object continues to challenge official art in both Russian and non-Russian contexts. One example is The SZ Group's (Gruppa SZ, which consisted of artists Viktor Skersis and Vadim Zakharov) project "Self Defense Against Things" (1981-2), which combined verbal, visual and performative elements in order to invoke the toilet to action. This paper uses Duchamp's iconic readymade as a jumping-off point to analyze the SZ Group's use of everyday objects. This paper will examine the group's reimagination of "things" as a method of producing counterculture art, and the way in which the objects acquire their own performative voices.

As part of their project, the SZ group wrote magical spells for the toilet (Zaklinanie unitaza), as well as created a series of photographs that served as guidelines, along with notes addressed to objects invoking them to fight against each other including "Playing off a Chair and a Lavatory." The note to the toilet ("K unitazu") invokes it as a "friend," and calls it a "beautiful lily blossoming in a fetid place." It attempts to convince the toilet that the chair is the reason that it is "chained to the floor" and unable to "fly like a bird." While Duchamp's iconic challenge to high culture and SZ group's actions both represent carnivalesque spectacles, this paper will argue that the SZ group does not merely recontextualize their objects in order to make meaning. Rather, they use the artifacts of Soviet everyday life and transform them into metaphorical heroes and villains in order to engage with the details of Soviet experience through ironic laughter.