The Mitki and the Art of Postmodern Protest in Russia, by Alexandar Mihailovic, is a detailed analysis of the work of the group Mitki from its inception in 1984 to its official dissolution in early 2008. Mitki is the name of two interrelated entities: a group of several conceptual artists and writers who were part of Leningrad's cultural underground since the mid-1980s and a subsequent subcultural movement that used aspects of a specific subculture that was formed by the group. At the very core of Mitki was a reaction to the late Soviet reality and profound disillusionment in Soviet projects and subsequent attempts to make sense of the rapidly moving and changing post-Soviet society after perestroika. The visual and textual language of the group is rooted in Russian folk art and it employs these historical references ironically. Mitki's art, writings, and self-expression are rooted in both prerevolutionary and Soviet Russian culture. The textual and visual works were created not only for a Russian audience that shared the same cultural associations but in most cases also for the small community of the artistic avant-garde that formed in late Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Therefore, due to its cultural specificity, the legacy of Mitki is difficult to interpret and analyze for an audience that does not share the same background.

Mihailovic's volume is the first comprehensive study of Mitki in English. Most of the interpretive work and primary sources have yet to be translated or publicized in English or other European languages. Taking on the task of explaining, contextualizing, analyzing, and interpreting the body of work by Mitki was ambitious. This book, then, deserves both praise for this ambitious undertaking and criticism for the opportunities that are not fully realized. The title and the introduction suggest that Mitki was an artistic group that embodied the idea of postmodern culture in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia and influenced further expressions of political protests, such as the Pussy Riot group, which is discussed in the introduction and conclusion. Indeed, in my view, the most successful parts of the book are the introduction and conclusion, because both attempt, to a certain extent,
to place the work of Mitki within the context of protest culture and counterculture. However, there is much more left to be done in terms of contextualization.

The book is divided into five chapters. The first chapter deals with the two founders of the group, Dmitrii Shagin and Vladimir Shinkarev. The second exposes Mitki’s challenge to heroic masculinity prevalent in the Soviet Union. The third chapter analyzes the role of alcohol and substance abuse as well as subsequent recovery from alcoholism in the work of Mitki. The fourth concentrates on the collaboration between Olga and Aleksandr Florenskii, the group’s core members. The author highlights the productive unity of the husband and wife and their unlimited interests in a continual questioning of popular and official post-Soviet culture. Finally, the last chapter discusses the work of the artist Viktor Tikhomirov. Tikhomirov combined the realistic approach with folk tradition and Soviet cultural heritage, which he and other Mitki attempted to subvert.

If the goal of the book is to show Mitki as a postmodern art group, then the book achieves its goal. It demonstrates that the group’s work was fragmentary, eclectic, occasionally haphazard, ironic, and ultimately useless in terms of political or social change. However, the analysis of the group is limited to a detailed discussion of its five members only, and there are just occasional allusions to the artistic production and ideological landscape outside and the entire subculture that the movement created. Finally, the author concentrates on the messages of single artworks, but he does not explain why scholars of Russian and East European art, literature, culture, and history need to know about the movement. The movement is neither contextualized within the underground culture of the Soviet Union of the 1970s and 1980s nor explained as part of late Soviet conceptualism. There is no chapter or section that explains the group’s actual work or major accomplishments. A short two-page chronology of Mitki’s exhibitions and works is hard to accept as a fully developed history of the movement. After reading the chronology and the book as whole, I still do not know what exactly they did and why it is important to know about them. Therefore, it is unclear who the intended audience of this volume is. The way it is written, even a student with an extensive cultural background will struggle to understand various references to Russian and Soviet culture, only a few of which are contextualized. Moreover, there are no comparisons between the group and similar Western or Eastern European groups, such as Situationists International, to anchor the discussion for the Western reader. The book then is aimed at a limited audience, comprising highly specialized scholars and graduate students who could recreate the narrative of cultural history that is missing here.

While the analysis of the texts is grounded in literary theory, the discussion of visual art, mainly prints and paintings, has no methodological premise. The entire volume mentions only two art historians, Liubov Gurevich and Boris Groys. Not only are larger parts of the art historical analysis of the Russian conceptual underground missing, but an overall analysis of the notion of folklore in Russian and Soviet art is also not included. In the analysis of Tikhomirov’s painting *Sisters* (*Sestry*, 1998) or *A Woman’s Lot* (*Zhenskaia dolia*, 2006), for example, a reference to their influence by Marc Chagall is missing. On pages 133-35, the author discusses Olga Florenskii’s collages and notes justifiably that they show the influence of Henri
Matisse, yet he does not acknowledge the connection to the Russian avant-garde. Occasionally Mikhailov compares the works of Mitki to Western examples; for example, he compares the duo of Olga and Aleksandr Florenskii, who signed their collaborative work O & A, to British conceptualists Gilbert and George. Yet, interestingly, the discussion revolves around the use of the ampersand and the corporate nature of the name and not the artistic production. Important issues could have been raised. For example, the collaboration between a female and male artist and their division of labor and choice of subject perhaps could have been compared to the famous Russian avant-garde duo of Aleksandr Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova.

As the first in-depth analysis of the group’s oeuvre in English, *The Mitki and the Art of Postmodern Protest in Russia* is an ambitious project and an important contribution to Russian cultural history. This monograph is important research because it outlines the major themes of Mitki’s work. However, more could have been done to contextualize the group within the Russian conceptual movement and to explain the transition from the Soviet to post-Soviet period of avant-garde Soviet art. The most valuable part of the book is the chapter on representation of substance abuse and subsequent rehabilitation. Themes of alcohol consumption and its influence on artistic production remain a rarely discussed issue. Another important topic is Mitki’s reevaluation of hegemonic sexuality and their interest in creating alternative or non-hegemonic masculinities. Mitki’s challenge to normative masculinity is especially important to analyze since the late Soviet underground had not been “queered” by scholarship yet and most current publications have not adapted queer theories as a lens of analysis.

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