



THE TRANSLINGUISTIC COLLABORATIVE POETRY OF SERGE SEGAY, REA NIKONOVA, AND JOHN M. BENNETT

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Abstract

How do three poets working in different languages collaborate and create poetry? This article discusses Zaum and transrationalist focus on processes and forms rather than on social myths. In the case of these three poets, those forms involve translanguistic and visual language structures, and the creation of totemic linguistic artifacts. To read such work, one must first experience it through a supreme suspension of disbelief, and then one may rationally consider that experience. Collaboration is especially apt for this transrationalist approach, in that it is in a sense “egoless”, and transcends the social being that is formed by our everyday individualistic rational mind. Includes samples of the work, and a complete bibliography of the three poets’ collaborative monographic publications.

Keywords: *Bennett; Nikonova; Sigej/Segay; Avant-Garde; Transrationalism; Zaum*

Poetry is a boundary line between word and no word
(Rea Nikonova, *Lost and Found Times*, 32, 1994, p. 42)

Since the late 1980’s, when communication between the Soviet Union and the rest of the world became much easier, Rea Nikonova and Serge Segay have been collaborating extensively with other poets, visual poets, and artists from many places around the world. The fascinating story of their wonderful

earlier work, which for decades was distributed in the Soviet Union through original copies, carbon paper copies, and the like, and how they began to contact the outside world through the medium of mail art, is well-known and does not need repeating here. I only wish to add that if one wishes to identify a single shining example of how the international mail art movement has been of fundamental importance in creating and fomenting today's international avant-garde arts, one needs to look no further than the case of Segay and Nikonova.

One of their early international collaborators was the US poet, visual poet, and mail artist John M. Bennett, the person writing these comments you are reading. I am a poet who works primarily in English, some Spanish, and with fragments of other languages. Segay and Nikonova, of course, work primarily in Russian, though both are able to communicate in English. My Russian consists of a few words, and a stumbling ability to decipher the Cyrillic alphabet.

How, then, do we write poetry together, an art form that communicates meaning through understood language? All three of us work in the realm of visual poetry, a medium that lends itself especially well to the Zaumist transrationalist tradition that forms the background of the Russians' esthetics. My own esthetic background is rooted in Zen Buddhism, Western European and Latin American surrealism and other avant-garde movements of some 100 years ago. It is safe to say that the three of us share a common language, in spite of the fact that we would probably experience some difficulty in having a conversation. (Though perhaps I underestimate their English: we have never met in person.)

Zaum and visual poetry, along with avant-garde movements in general, tend to bypass national boundaries, languages, and cultures for several reasons, I believe. In the first place they often tend to focus strongly on esthetic processes and forms rather more than on the reaffirmation of social myths. The latter is a function of more mainstream and conventional arts. The avant-garde, of course, tends to challenge those myths.

Another reason for the international nature of the avant-garde is the fact that it tends to be rather small in the number of persons practicing it, so that individual artists must search far afield to find like-minded colleagues, and to form a community. There is also the more general fact that such artists are in a sense moving ahead of "history", seeing the big picture and working with universal ideas. This puts them somewhat outside the more limited national cultures and histories in which they happen to live. I would say that avant-garde artists are usually quite well-educated and knowledgeable about what has already been done in the arts.

As Nikonova and Segay collaborated more and more with international artists, or treated/altered/added to their work, the languages in their work multiplied. There was German, French, English, Spanish, and so on. This de-

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