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# Kaminker's *Mythical Menagerie*

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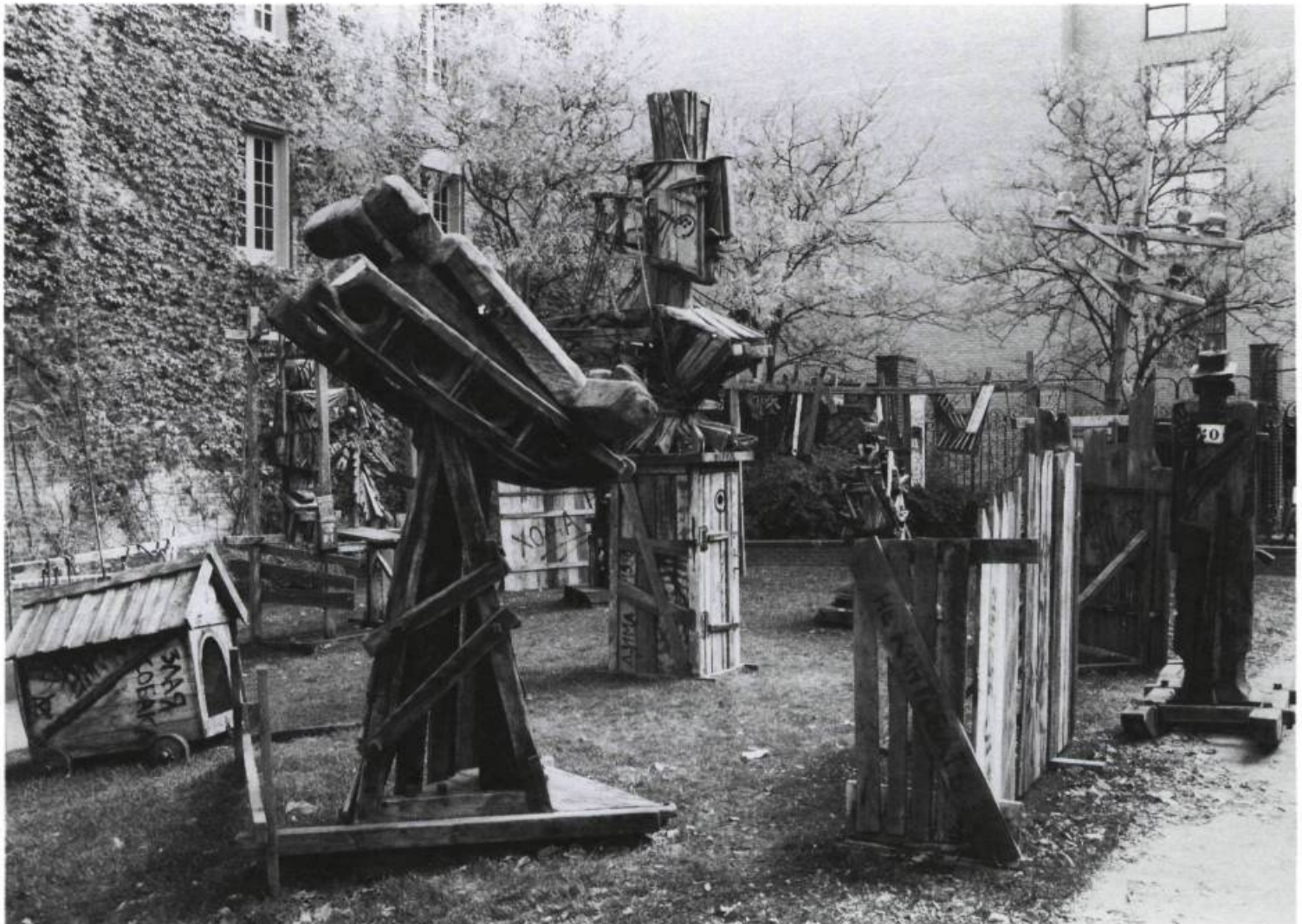
Dmitri Kaminker, *Firebird: Beyond the Fence*  
Toronto Sculpture Garden  
Until April 14th, 1991

Despite the fact that they all worked within the incubus of a highly demotic aesthetic programme, Russia's artists had a much simpler job of identifying their expression in relation to a collective culture before Glastnost than they do today. Before the collapse of Communist ideology and Gorbachev's initial efforts at democratizing the country, unofficial artists exerted much of their energy to working against the "official" Soviet art and its repression of

free expression. "Official" artists went about their work, largely ignoring the ideology of the state but with the state's approval. Thus, artists on either side of the fence could always define their actions vis-à-vis the ideological imperative, as either part of the "official" cultural programme or alternatively as unofficial artists, marginalized by a moribund political system.

Throughout the world today, we are witnessing an unprecedented collapse of ideologies. The new basis for creative expression stands firmly outside any traditional ideological ethos. In the West, the very basis of avant-gardism is now being brought

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Dmitri Kaminker, *Firebird: Beyond the Fence* (installation detail), Toronto Sculpture Garden, 1991.





into question, its on-going imperative has been so closely associated with the art market, and an economic model for historical progress. Likewise, Russia's artists are questioning the same limits to ideology but from the other side of the coin, as more universal humanistic concerns begin to surface.

For Dmitri Kaminker, whose large-scale installation *Firebird : Beyond the fence* is on view at the Toronto Sculpture Garden until April 14th, life as an artist in Russia was never that simple. Upon graduation from the Leningrad Decorative and Applied Art College, he spent 11 years in a underground studio and states modestly, "It was a hard life". Kaminker was an "official" artist, "because if you're not an official artist, you can't rent a studio".

A show of Leningrad artists presented at the Harbour Exhibition Complex in Leningrad in 1989 saw the first merging of modernist works from all camps. Here, both official and unofficial artists sought to leave behind the narrow structures of political definition and exhibit together. It is here that Rina Greer, Director of the Toronto Sculpture first saw Kaminker's work and invited him to complete a project for Toronto. He arrived last summer to work at the York University Sculpture Studio in North York, his suitcase loaded with various assemblage items he and his two children gleaned from his apartment to be included in the piece - bits of wallpaper, nails, door handles, anything that was moveable. While in Toronto, he spent up to 16 hours a day preparing the various individual works for installation over two months. The sculptures he has created for this occasion are rough-cut wood assemblage pieces that have a folksy, larger-than-life flair. They represent a selection of everyday characters drawn from a typical suburb of Leningrad, a microcosm of life resembling the place where Kaminker now lives. "The suburbs in Russia are very poor and sometimes dangerous - very different from American suburbs.... more like small peasant communities. The suburbs are outside of ideology, away from the city council. I can feel free there." These solemn, yet oddly comical personages reveal much about the complex nature of the Russian psyche, recalling the chessboard netherworld of an Arthur Koestler novel, where double entendre and Orwellian wordspeak is not a fiction but part of an on-going reality. As such, for all its fantastic creativity, Kaminker's art is less an art of the mind, more a forthright recreation of the everyday experience of average Russian who does not seek an extravagant life, but liveable one.

The sensitive, textured characters that comprise Dmitri Kaminker's *Firebird: Beyond the Fence* evolved out of his role as an assistant who made large-scale wooden models for an "official" artist specializing in huge monuments. He would be given a drawing from which he would build a wooden armature and finish the piece with clay. Soon he began to realize that the wooden structures he created underneath were more interesting than the finished monuments, and it influenced his present work. Like many of our own artists, Kaminker scours old junkyards and torn down homes in Leningrad recuperating old objects and found materials that "have a history" for his works. "I usually use old



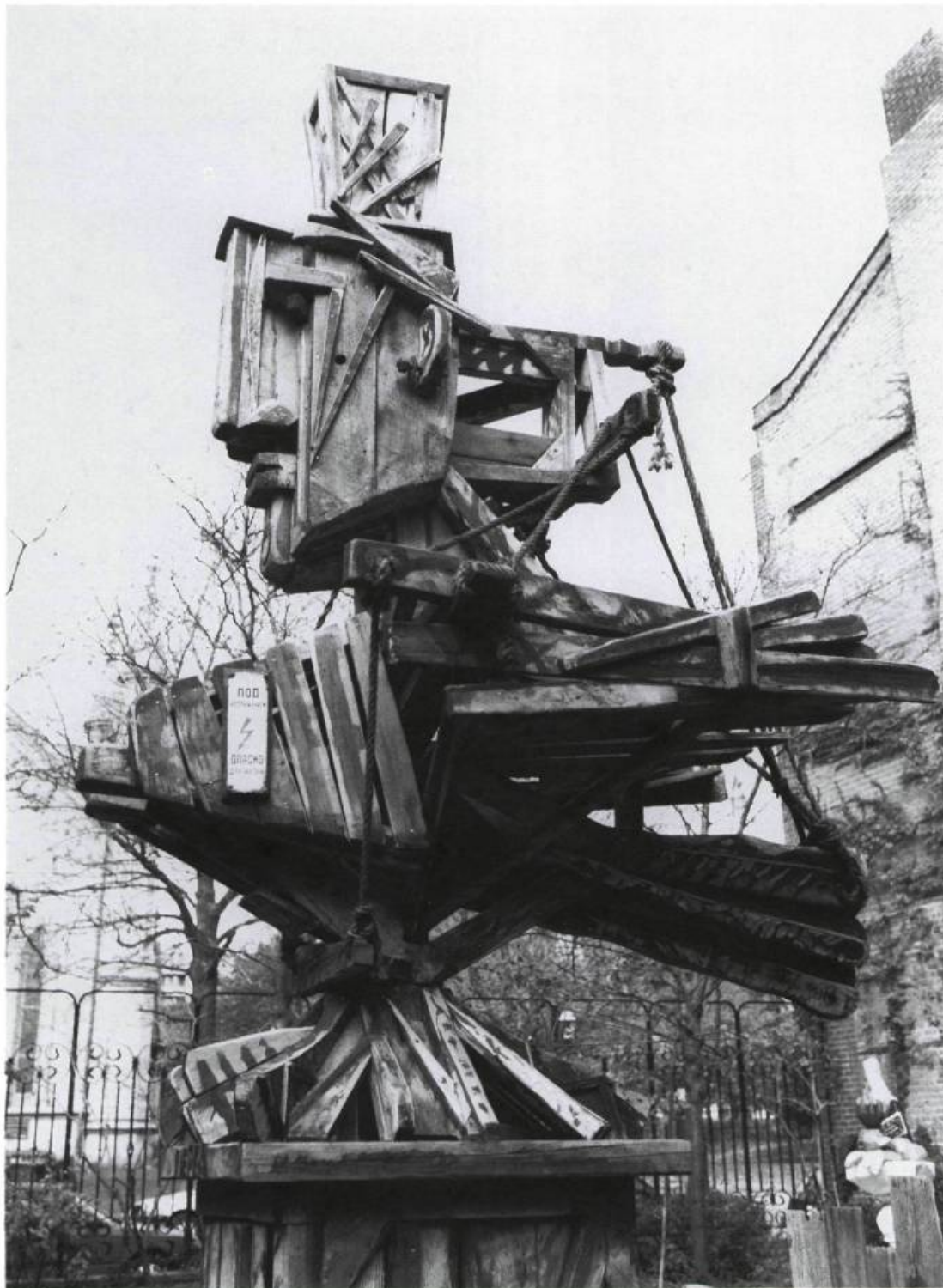
lumber -it keeps some of the spirit of the people who lived with it. There's some spirit of the old life."

All of these 8 works oppressed and emblematic forms have a rustic simplicity that recalls pre-revolutionary folk art traditions. They are set into a vernacular landscape interspersed with sections of a partially burnt wooden fence on which youthful graffiti inscriptions, a Russian street sign, and other eclectic details have been added. There is a constructivist laundry line, from which various irregular shapes of wood hang like solid, inflexible memories, and an ironic telegraph pole that resembles the symbol of the Orthodox Russian cross from the Eastern church's liturgical past. All of this forms a strangely intimate, fairytale atmosphere into which he sets his forlorn iconic images, totemic statues that echo Russia's propagandistic nightmare of half-truths. *Blind man* stands transfixed on a rocker-like pedestal. His rigid, somewhat Chaplinesque trajectory is one in which hopes and expectations have been straightjacketed by the politics of his real life situation. Ideally, he would like to touch the earth with a stick and reach the sky with his eyes, but instead he is caught in a static to and fro movement of uncomfortable introspection.

Dmitri Kaminker in front of *Old Hero*.  
Toronto Sculpture Garden.

*Boy on Sled (Young Hero)* literally flies through the air; the very image on the Young Pioneer, an ideological young hero who places the ideology of state before his family. The only thing that supports him is a tiny house, whose interior is plastered with newspapers, a sardonic symbol of the appalling shortage of housing in Russia, and the Russian family's stoic temperament, the way they will put up with short term inconvenience, while hoping for a better future. The centre-piece of this whole fantastic, village, titled *Firebird on Pedestal* personifies the traditional Russian folktale wherein happiness is attained only if one could catch hold of the tail feathers of the firebird. Like an oversized portrait bust,





brilliantly constructed of assembled pieces of wood, its formal presentation is more like what one could see in an official bronze portrait bust from the 19th century but the handling shows a sophisticated facility for the modernist idiom.

*Old Hero* has a solemn, god-like image of an aging Stalinist hero, who keeps his ideological illusions intact only as a safeguard against a changing world, has the baroque tenor of a mocking caricature.

Seated atop his wine box, and with a bird on his head (An allusion to his more hopeful, imaginative thoughts?), he bears the scars of past battles and holds a crutch in one hand, a mug of beer in the other, the curls of wood on top the froth, while staring blankly off into space. In Kaminker's own words, "You do not tell the town hero who fought the invading Germans that he is wrong, a liar or a fool. His life, like those of other Russians is implicated in the experience of all Russians." The base of this piece is an outhouse papered with propaganda, another witty comment on the day-to-day legacy of living under an ideological régime whose original

raison d'être has vanished. *Wishful Child*, the most hopeful of these assemblage portraits, depicts a small girl in the act of decorating a New Year's Tree, a beautifully constructed figuration of zigzag patterns. The lintels and beams of the architecture, the support structure of the piece on which she stands is barely held together with rope. In front of this symbol of a more spirited future, we see the most primitive of communication symbols: a bulky Russian mail box which contains a propaganda newspaper and a doorbell.

Somewhat isolated from the main elements of this installation, and situated in front of a waterfall that forms part of the Garden's backdrop Kaminker has constructed a long table. Its barren flatness recalls the Steppes of Russia, the wheat producing country, a traditional Stalinist symbol of hope. A page of propaganda is affixed to table's surface on which a brightly coloured bowl of fruit contains symbols of abundance - bananas, oranges, grapes, a pineapple, and a bottle of Russian champagne carved in wood - the unrealized desires of all this ideological tragedy, something far from these peoples' daily lives but never entirely forgotten.

Unlike so many of this cultural comrades, the 41 year old Kaminker has chosen to stay in his native Leningrad. As he continually warns, many of Russia's émigrés artists who are presently enjoying market success in the West no longer address Russian themes using the language of Russian culture but do so with an American flair designed for effect, for a market sale.

Kaminker's works shed a ray of superstitious courage and hope amid the confusion of current post-ideological works. Like obsolete, yet gentle dreamers these demi-

Gods seem to have been formed by historical forces stronger than their dreams, weaker than their thoughts. The foolish exactitude of this cruel joke pushed them into extremes of experience. The overt mythological sense in Kaminker's grandiose ménagerie reveals a truly remarkable power of imagination rooted in actual experience, not abstract delusions. These figures speak of the decay of ideology in a beautifully mythical way. ♦

Dmitri Kaminker, *Firebird on Pedestal* (detail). Toronto Sculpture Garden, 1991.