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ON THE WEB

## Moscow Show Pits Art Against Church and State

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By STEVEN LEE MYERS, New York Times

MOSCOW, Nov. 25 - After last year's terrorist attack on a school in Beslan, Russia, and President Vladimir V. Putin's subsequent steps to strengthen his political power, Marat Guelman formulated a response of sorts. It was an artistic doctrine and a political declaration, a social and cultural challenge to the state of what he called Russia 1.

Mr. Guelman, owner of one of the country's first post-Soviet art galleries, called his project "Russia 2" and opened it with an exhibition of paintings and other works intended to parallel Moscow's first biennial of contemporary art last January and February. The exhibition's tone was irreverent, subversive and piercingly critical of Mr. Putin, the Kremlin and, significantly, the Russian Orthodox Church.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Russia 1 has struck back.

A group of nine artists unaffiliated with the exhibit has filed a civil suit against Mr. Guelman and the exhibition hall where the works first appeared, the Central House of Artists. They are seeking the equivalent of \$175,000 in compensation for the "moral injury" caused by four of the works, by some of Russia's most prominent contemporary artists: Gor Chahal; Marina Kolodobskaya; the comic pair Vyacheslav Mizin and Aleksandr Shaburov, known as the Blue Noses; and the trio of conceptual artists calling themselves A.E.S.

"The openly confrontational, provocative and scandalous nature of the exhibition does not fit in any account to any understanding of art and has nothing in common with it," the artists' complaint reads. A court in Moscow began hearing the case this month, and its next session is scheduled for Dec. 5.

On Dec. 8, a large selection of "Russia 2" is to go on view in New York City at the White Box gallery in Chelsea. Other works from the Moscow show are to appear at Magnan Projects' Annex in Chelsea and at Ethan Cohen Fine Arts in TriBeCa from Dec. 8 to Jan. 11.

The complaint filed in Moscow cited provisions in Russia's Constitution protecting human rights and religious freedom and an article in the criminal code against inciting ethnic and religious hatred. That article was the basis earlier this year for the criminal conviction of the director and a curator at the Andrei Sakharov Museum in Moscow on a charge arising from a 2003 exhibition of paintings and sculptures that many saw as ridiculing the Russian Orthodox Church. The director, Yuri Y. Samodurov, and the curator, Lyudmila V. Vasilovskaya, were fined \$3,600 each, although not imprisoned as

prosecutors had demanded.

Like the Sakharov case, the dispute over "Russia 2" has thrust into opposition two groups - artists and the religiously observant - that suffered enormously under state-imposed ideology in the Soviet Union but have flourished since the state unraveled in 1991. It also underlines what Mr. Putin's critics argue is the emergence of a new ideology, with the church at its foundation, that rarely tolerates public criticism of the state and its symbols.

Which was Mr. Guelman's point in the first place.

"It is not at all like it was in Soviet times, when art was underground," he said in an interview in his loftlike apartment, which looks out on the newly rebuilt Christ the Savior Cathedral. "It is just that there are two countries that exist today in Russia. 'Russia 2' showed this."

The exhibition drew complaints from the start. A group of nationalists in the Russian Parliament quickly appealed to prosecutors, as did members of the church. It was a group of artists, though, who filed formal charges, in both criminal and civil court. They are all members of the Moscow Union of Artists - a sort of official academy - who are Orthodox believers.

One of them, Dmitri Shmarin, a neorealist painter, said in an interview that he saw no contradiction in artists suing other artists over the content of their work.

"We are not trying to restrict artistic freedom," he said. "Artists, of course, can do whatever they want, but if they insult us, we ask the state to protect us."

He called the works in "Russia 2" blasphemous, adding that they were intended to "destabilize the internal peace of our country."

Mr. Chahal's triptych, "The Sun of Truth, Kindness and Beauty," depicted nearly abstract figures that appeared, crucified, in flames. Ms. Kolodobskaya created an iconlike sculpture into which viewers can peek to watch a video, some of it sexually explicit.

A.E.S. - named for the initials of its artists, Tatiana Arzamasova, Lev Evzovich and Evgeny Svyatsky - displayed several photographic compositions from its long-running "Islamic Project" series, which merge images of the Muslim world with landmarks like the Statue of Liberty. The complaint specifically cites "Moscow 2006," which depicts a futuristic Kremlin with minarets and other architectural features from the Muslim world.

The artists known as the Blue Noses - with "sarcasm and irony," according to the complaint - contributed a photographic composition showing Pushkin, Mr. Putin and an icon of Jesus Christ transposed on a man's naked torso.

That work appeared in Mr. Guelman's catalog but not in the show itself, though it did appear in another exhibition related to the biennial.

A criminal investigation began, but in the spring, prosecutors declined to press charges. The civil case was dismissed on a technicality but was later revived. In addition to the \$175,000 in damages, the complaint asks the courts to prohibit any future display of the

works in Russia, from galleries to magazines or other printed media.

Mr. Guelman seems an unlikely opponent of Mr. Putin. He worked as a political consultant at the Kremlin for five years and later served two years as director of analytical programs on the state television network, Channel 1. He still has friends in the Kremlin, and that helped him avoid criminal charges, he said.

Yet in the interview, Mr. Guelman said he had come to disagree with many Kremlin policies, including a steady erosion of the freedom of expression that has spread from state television into art and literature. He also pointed to the elimination of direct elections of regional governors, a decision announced by Mr. Putin in response to the Beslan school siege, in which at least 331 hostages died, more than half of them children.

"It became clear that shadowy powers were now at work," Mr. Guelman said of the Kremlin's response.

He described "Russia 2" as not simply an exhibition but a creative agency through which artists, writers and other intellectuals could express themselves, be it in catalogs or in galleries - without heeding official, or accepted, ideology. He said that the movement had about 400 members.

"There is a national atmosphere where contemporary art somehow feels alienated," he said. "Somehow contemporary art cannot be patriotic because it is cosmopolitan. The art world here in Russia may be the only sphere left where people work in a world context."

In New York, the gallery exhibitions next month of work from "Russia 2" are a counterpoint to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's "Russia!" show, whose opening in September Mr. Putin attended. The exhibition at White Box includes the subversive subtitle "Bad News From Russia," very much in keeping with Mr. Guelman's sensibility.

"Americans want bad news from Russia," Mr. Guelman said. "It means that everything is right in the world."