

**The
Importance
Of Being
An Influence
by Jens
Hoffmann
with Sanya
Kantarovsky,
Ryan Gander,
Jac Leirner,
Camille Henrot,
Cheyney
Thompson,
Rayyane
Tabet
and Liz Magor.
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Jens Hoffmann is Deputy Director, Exhibitions and Programs at the Jewish Museum in New York. Formerly Director of the CCA-Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco and Director of Exhibitions and Chief Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, Hoffmann has organized more than 50 shows internationally—including major biennials like the 12th Istanbul Biennial (2011) and the 9th Shanghai Biennial (2012)—and written more than 200 texts on art and exhibition making.

Sanya Kantarovsky

A Google search for Nadya Rusheva yields scores of similar results—mostly dated looking Russian fan pages, message boards and tumblrs that reveal a cult-like adulation replete with a litany of melodramatic platitudes such as “the lightness of genius”, “sighs on paper” and “forever 17.” Clicking through these sites, one quickly learns three facts: Nadya Rusheva was an artist who drew with uncanny precocity, she died abruptly of a brain aneurysm in 1969, nationally known at the age of 17, and she left behind a body of work consisting of more than 12,000 drawings and works on paper.

Rusheva, in the words of her aunt, “did not know the eraser.” She drew entirely *a la prima*, skipping the fuss of the preliminary sketch. Her pen and ink figures often approach calligraphy, thrown onto the page in an efficient shorthand. Despite the animated, sometimes childish haste of her marks, her sophisticated compositions are fixed in what Guston would describe as “positions that feel destined.” Rusheva described her process as little more than outlining forms that were already present on the page like “watermarks.” This anterior way of seeing was due largely to the fact that she found much of her subject matter in literature. She depicted characters already fully formed in her mind’s eye, drawn from classical mythology, Tolstoy, Pushkin and Lermontov. Yet the inventiveness and deeply felt peculiarity of Nadya’s visual world makes it difficult to regard as illustration. At times her drawings seduce with a Matisse-like fluency, and at others—like in the quick sketches of her bell-bottomed classmates—they betray an adolescent awkwardness, leaning closer to the values of ‘60s fashion kitsch and cartoons. The wet eyed faces, limber ballerinas, hussars and flâneurs that populate her work are impossible to classify.

I first saw her drawings as a 1st grader in Moscow. For years since, I’ve tried, both consciously and not, to imitate her firm hand. On a trip back to Moscow a few years ago, I rifled through my earliest drawings, startled at the extent to which they aped hers. I became interested in seeking out the work and eventually met Natalia Usenko, a high school literature teacher who maintains a minuscule museum devoted to Rusheva, situated within a classroom in the artist’s former high school on the outskirts of Moscow. With dozens of original drawings and glass vitrines housing tidy arrangements of Nadya’s notebooks, drawing utensils and school uniforms, this strange archive cum memorial is the only site open to the public where one can see her drawings in the flesh.

Rusheva’s life, began with the death of Stalin and ended with the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, neatly coincided with the years of the Khrushchev Thaw. Her popularity during the ‘60s was a reflection of the hopeful air that marked the time. Her remarkable illustrations to Mikhaïl Bulgakov’s newly published subversive masterpiece *Master and Margarita* became her best known work, though she was a fundamentally apolitical artist, who thrived in the breathing room afforded by the period’s ideological relaxation. Despite the prevailing narrative of the tragic *wunderkind* that permeates her many Internet memorials, Nadya’s singular oeuvre, much like Francesca Woodman’s, demands engagement on its own terms, unfettered by the martyrdom we like to attach to brilliance that lives fast and dies young.

Sanya Kantarovsky (b. 1982, Moscow) lives and works in New York. Recent solo exhibitions include “Gushers” at Marc Foxx (2015), Los Angeles and “Apricot Juice” at Studio Voltaire, London (2015). Recent group exhibitions include “Tightrope Walk: Painted Images After Abstraction”, White Cube, London (2016) curated by Barry Schwabsky, and the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts curated by Nicola Lees (2015). Currently, Kantarovsky is included in “The Eccentrics”, curated by Ruba Katrib on view at the SculptureCenter, New York. Upcoming solo exhibitions include Tanya Leighton, Berlin (2016) and Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London (2016).

Digitando il nome di Nadya Rusheva su Google, i risultati di ricerca sono decine di pagine simili: vecchie fan page russe, bacheche e vecchi tumblr che rivelano un’adulazione simile al culto, piena di luoghi comuni melodrammatici, come “la leggerezza del genio”, “sospiri su carta” e “17 anni per sempre.” Navigando tra questi siti, si colgono rapidamente tre informazioni: Nadya Rusheva è stata un’artista che ha disegnato con una precocità quasi inquietante, è morta all’improvviso nel 1969 a causa di un aneurisma cerebrale, era famosa nella sua nazione già all’età di 17 anni e si è lasciata alle spalle un corpus di opere composto da più di 12.000 disegni e lavori su carta.

Rusheva, stando alle parole della zia, “non conosceva la gomma da cancellare”. Disegnava sempre “alla prima”, evitando la fatica di disegni preliminari. Le sue figure, tracciate a penna e inchiostro, sono spesso al limite della calligrafia, lanciate sulla pagina con un tratto breve ed efficace. Nonostante l’animata, a volte infantile fretta del segno, queste raffinate composizioni sono fissate in quelle che Guston descriverebbe come “posizioni apparentemente predestinate”. Rusheva definì il suo processo creativo come un semplice tentativo di delineare forme già presenti, in filigrana, sulla pagina. Questo sguardo è conseguenza del fatto che Rusheva trovava gran parte dei suoi soggetti nella letteratura. Raffigurava personaggi già completamente disegnati dagli occhi della mente, tratti dalla mitologia classica, da Tolstoj, da Puskin, da Lermontov; eppure l’inventiva e la profonda peculiarità del mondo visivo di Nadya rende difficile considerarle semplici illustrazioni. A volte i suoi disegni seducono per una scioltezza che ricorda Matisse, altre volte – come nei rapidi schizzi dei suoi compagni dai pantaloni a zampa – tradiscono un disagio adolescenziale, avvicinandosi al kitsch anni ‘60, alla moda e ai cartoni animati. I volti dagli occhi umidi, le agili ballerine, gli ussari e i flâneurs che popolano il suo lavoro sono impossibili da classificare.

Vidi per la prima volta i suoi disegni quando avevo sei anni, a Mosca, e cercai per molto tempo d’imitare la sua mano ferma. Durante un viaggio a Mosca, qualche anno fa, frugando tra i miei primi schizzi, fui sorpreso dalla quantità di disegni che la imitavano. Mi appassionai talmente all’idea di saperne di più al riguardo, che incontrai Natalia Usenko, una professoressa di letteratura del liceo che mantiene un minuscolo museo della Rusheva in una classe della scuola frequentata dall’artista, nei sobborghi di Mosca.

Con decine di disegni originali, vetrine che ospitano ordinate composizioni di taccuini di Nadya, strumenti da disegno e uniformi scolastiche, questo strano archivio e memoriale è l’unico sito aperto al pubblico in cui si possono ammirare i suoi disegni dal vivo. La vita della Rusheva, iniziata con la morte di Stalin e conclusasi con l’invasione sovietica della Cecoslovacchia, coincise esattamente con gli anni del disgelo. La sua popolarità negli anni ‘60 era un riflesso dell’aria di speranza che regnava al tempo. Le sue notevoli illustrazioni per *Il Maestro e Margarita*, capolavoro sovversivo di Mikhaïl Bulgakov pubblicato in quegli anni, sono diventate la sua opera più nota, nonostante Nadya fosse un’artista fondamentalmente apolitica, che ha prosperato nella stanza di decompressione offerta dal rilassamento ideologico dell’epoca.

Nonostante la tragica storia della bambina prodigio scomparsa precocemente che permea i suoi molti memoriali su Internet, la singolare opera di Nadya, molto simile a quella di Francesca Woodman, richiede coinvolgimento a prescindere. Senza l’aura di martirio che ci piace attribuire a coloro che vivono velocemente e muoiono giovani.

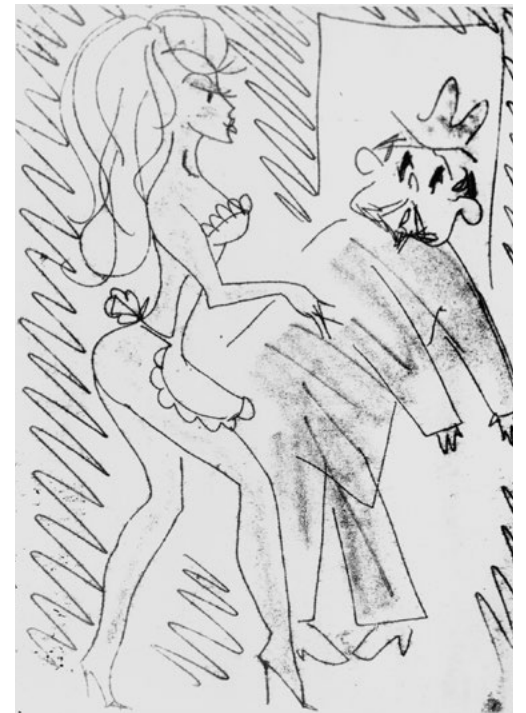
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Nadya Rusheva, *Ivan the Homeless* (after Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*), 1968. From Nadya Rusheva, *Portraits and Scenes from Mikhail Bulgakov's Novel Master and Margarita*, National Literary Museum and Studio of the Soviet Literary Fund, 1991



Portrait of Nadya Rusheva, ca. mid-1960s



Nadya Rusheva, *Hella and the buffet manager Sokov* (after Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*), 1968. From Nadya Rusheva, *Portraits and Scenes from Mikhail Bulgakov's Novel Master and Margarita*, National Literary Museum and Studio of the Soviet Literary Fund, 1991



Nadya Rusheva, *The Master Thinks* (after Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*), 1968. From Nadya Rusheva, *Portraits and Scenes from Mikhail Bulgakov's Novel Master and Margarita*, National Literary Museum and Studio of the Soviet Literary Fund, 1991



Sanya Kantarovsky, *No Down No Feather* (after Eisenstein), 2015. Courtesy: Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London. Photo: Ben Westoby