

MARC SCHEPS - THE GROBMANIAN PROJECT

I well remember my first meeting with Michail Grobman at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, shortly after the inauguration of the new building in April 1971. He was arriving from Moscow, spoke only Russian and had managed to bring part of his oeuvre with him. It was my first direct contact with the Moscow avant-garde of the sixties, an encounter with something new and fascinating, the rebirth of Russian art after a long hibernation. Soon afterwards, we were inaugurating an exhibition of his work at the museum. It was, no doubt, one of the first displays of the Russian avant-garde in the West, at a time when information about it was scarce and contacts sketchy.

On his arrival in Israel, Grobman was a young artist of 32, with a period of intense artistic activity behind him covering the years of the sixties. It was in Moscow that his work took shape and his personality first claimed recognition, but it is in Israel, first in Jerusalem, then in Tel Aviv, that he has been able to develop freely over the last 28 years. His house at No. 3 Simtat Nes-Tsiona has become a meeting-place for Israeli artists and intellectuals and a magnet for devotees of Russian and Jewish cultures. The man has become an institution, an authority from whom advice is sought and whose voice is listened to. It is hardly possible to speak of the art of Grobman without first defining this multi-dimensional man and describing the dual guiding lights that defines his work. Michail Grobman is not only a visual artist; he is also a poet and writer, but it would be wrong to reduce him to the mere exercise of a double profession. True, he likes to stay at home to paint and write, but also to devote himself to other activities. Grobman is a scholar fascinated by Russian and Jewish culture, not only researching their historical sources, but closely tracking their current development. As a result, he has created a vast and ever-growing library, whose archives are now without equal and constitute a source of learning indispensable to other researchers, who visit it from all over the world.

Besides this, Grobman has gathered an art collection which combines works of the historical Russian avant-garde with those of artists of his generation, above all the Moscovite avant-garde of the sixties. Formed while he was still in Russia, this collection of historical and contemporary work has a breadth, depth and quality which are quite remarkable; it was the subject of an exhibition I organised at the Museum of Art in Tel Aviv in 1988 under the title "Avant-Garde Revolution Avant-Garde". The selection covered 110 artists and bore witness to a profound knowledge of Russian art, impeccable taste and a keen sense of the historical weight of the works. Grobman's activities as librarian, archivist and collector are without doubt intimately linked to those of the painter and writer; they are to the latter like a feeding-ground, an indispensable, even inseparable, complement. Grobman, beyond



Museum Majakovskogo

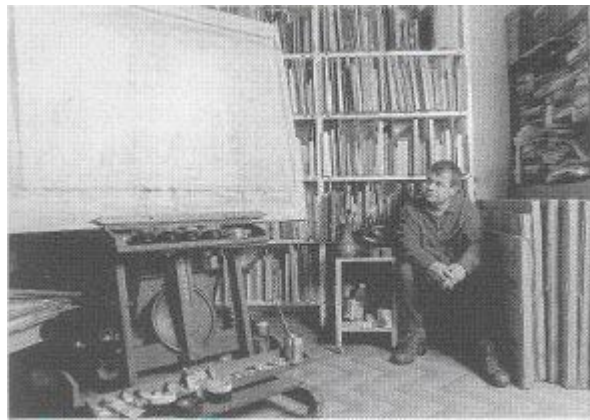
November 11, 1965, Moscow

from left: Alia Yefimova, Natasha and Gennadij Ajgi,
Irena Vruble-Golubkina, NN, Nikolaj Hardjev,
Rudin Duganov and Michail Grobman
Photo: Archive M. Grobman

all this is also a man for whom all activity has a social dimension and, in this sense, each book acquired, each document added, each new work in his collection are part of a social project of which the aims have been clearly marked out. To achieve these aims he will be by turns commentator, journalist, editor, exhibition organiser and author of manifestos. Grobman leaves no doubt: he seeks to *convince*, he does not set to keep his convictions to himself. He creates and participates in study groups on cultural or political problems. He organises artists to take joint action. It may be said that his own action is excessive, but also that by bringing together all the facets of activity it justifies them. Grobman does not randomise his activities:

one does not take place to the detriment of another, and together they form a whole that may be called the Grobmanian project. To act means, of course, to take risks, which Grobman does with a kind of provocative joy: he is an accomplished, sometimes formidable polemicist. He loves paradox, the extremist argument, and his listeners are overwhelmed by his gospel rather than subscribing to his ideas. He has never sought to please or to swim with the tide: most of the time he has been at odds with established power, a position that suits him well, since it enables him to act, to take the initiative, to attack all that is conventional. But he never allows himself to be pushed to the margins; he is always at the centre of things, a fighter with nothing of the rebel, an accomplished strategist, a lucid, critical and independent spirit fiercely committed to the promotion of his ideas. Grobman is endowed with a long-term capacity for resistance, is able to await his hour with great patience. After 40 years it seems that his time is come: at last he is recognised, even accepted, invited to take part in the debate, perhaps not yet truly understood, always feared because unpredictable and ready to spoil the sport.

When Grobman came to art in the late fifties, the Russian historical avant-garde, reduced to silence for 30 years and absent from the museum picture rails, survived only in the memory of a small number of artists and intellectuals. On the other hand, the official art installed by the Soviet regime had, in the new post-Stalinist age, lost its underlying motivation and was withering into an outdated academism. For a young artist like Grobman, therefore, it was a time to examine basic premises and try a new beginning. Was it possible to link back to a tradition which had played a decisive role in the definition of modern art (Kandinsky, Malevich, Tainin)? Could three decades of socialist realism be ignored? How to connect with Western contemporary art? Every artist of the period tried to answer these questions in their own way, or rather to overstep the questions to propose models to create a new, nonconformist art. To judge the successes and failures of the time it is necessary to understand the immensity of the task facing the artists. It was a matter of defining a new cultural identity within the Russian context, to rediscover an historical memory, enriched by all the experience of the past without, however, seeking to pick up the argument where it had been broken off. It was to be the beginning of a prolonged process which is far from complete, and the stages of which cannot be forced. The history of Russian art is full of lessons on the matter: the westernisation of Russian art was accelerated from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Russian art was oscillating between Western avant-garde and a return to popular sources and orthodox tradition. In any event, it was an art moving in line with an historical development. Grobman realised that the answer to the three questions mentioned earlier was going to be complex. Certainly, it would be necessary to renew the link with the Russian avant-garde, but without copying it. From Malevich he was to retain the metaphysical dimension of art, which had to



Michail Grobman at home

December 26, 1995, Photo: Baran Osirovich

be reintroduced into painting by new means. From Larionov he would keep the enrichment through popular sources, a kind of reservoir of the imaginary. And Chagall showed him that attachment to a living cultural identity did not deprive art of its universality. As for how to deal with Soviet painting, Grobman was to be a pioneer of the tendency that showed that by dismantling its mechanism, both pictorial and ideological, it could be stored safely away in the dusty pigeon holes of history. Contemporary Western painting, for its part, deserved careful study, but just as, after a brief cubo-futurist interlude, the Russian avant-garde had been able to develop original propositions like Rayonnism, Suprematism and Constructivism, so the artists of the new age needed to discover new paths to follow, to correspond to the genius of their own cultural identity. It was in this way that Grobman was to forge the new tools necessary to create an artistic language according with his own personality and with what he felt to be his Russian and Jewish identity. To give form to a new spirituality in art, he invented a visual vocabulary laden with symbolic content and introduced writing into his imagery to create an oeuvre that he would himself define as "magic symbolism". From that moment the road was marked out, with art redefined as a transcendental phenomenon whose purpose was to transmit a message. The message was to be conceptualised in a new system of values through a coded symbolic language with a universal decoder. Within this framework Grobman was able to develop his art in many diverse directions and using constantly changing means. He was to tackle the great Tsarist and Soviet myths,

ferociously demolishing them in collages and paintings from 1964 onwards, returning to the same themes in the nineties. Grobman is above all concerned to return its soul to a society that had lost its deep sense of identity. He rediscovers the great themes of life and death, but also the desire to inspire the dream and to reveal beauty.

Like many Russian artists, Grobman was to leave Russia, but to become neither nomad nor exile. He settled at the other pole around which his life and art revolved. There was no trauma, since he was in his other home, and thenceforth assumed his double identity in an environment where Russian culture had a special place. He found himself facing an artistic scene where all eyes were turned to America and where there was almost total ignorance of recent developments in Russia. Grobman's art seemed adjusted to a different clock. He did not fit with the different Western criteria and was therefore in danger of marginalisation. He reacted with the creation of the "Leviathan" group, which presented itself to the public for the first time in 1978. Grobman's symbolic language was projected into space and inscribed into the landscape; his spectator-less performances will defy oblivion with the help of photography. He was back at the heart of the debate, faithful to his vocabulary and to his message and expressing himself with ease through the medium of contemporary art. From that moment he was to participate actively in artistic life in Israel and his works were exhibited in important exhibitions and in the museums. His thematic repertoire broadened to include varied treatments of the visual and political reality of Israel. But Russia and the Jewish tradition continued to have their place in his work, as they did with Chagall and Kabakov, a friend from his years in Moscow. Sometimes his pictures are simply painted texts, often text and image carry equal weight in the picture; more rarely the image



"Avant-garde - Revolution - Avant-garde"

Tel Aviv Museum, November 7, 1988

from right: Michail Grobman, Zlata Grobman,

Marc Scheps, Shlomo Lahat

Photo: Archive M. Grobman

lone is entrusted with the message. Over the years his paintings have become larger, sometimes with vast plains of vibrant colours; more recently, the brush-strokes show a spontaneous, even expressive, tendency, creating surfaces of great liveliness. From time to time large collages appear, renewals of the genre showing great originality. More and more, the work of Grobman is seen as a journal of his mental life, and in it are found all the contradictions and meanderings of an intense existence preoccupied by the infinite complexity of reality. Grobman's art continues to defy categorisation, for the simple reason that the artist has always refused to be imprisoned by such constraints. His art responds with rigour and constancy to the panoply of the phenomena of contemporary life, and in this it reflects the agitation of the age. In it we find scepticism and irony, but also faith and love, the loss of illusions and Utopian dreams, sarcastic commentary on human folly, tenderness for nature, philosophic reflection or, perhaps, just the memory of a friend. From image to image, the intimate journal of the artist reveals to us our own existence, with all that is fluid and irremediable in it. With the passage of time, Grobman's work follows its chosen path, ever changing, ever faithful to itself.