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Set in a pre-revolutionary warehouse, this idyll has no industrial prowess; on the contrary, it takes place where progress has failed and the human spectacle is a remnant of some ritual of heroic youth, no longer organised but random, sublime and wilfully voyeuristic. It's a portrait of a new life after ideology, beautiful, capricious and aimless.

## **Sonia Leber & David Chesworth's Zaum Tractor: Diving into a brave new world**

Robert Nelson

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**Zaum Tractor Sonia Leber and David Chesworth Fehily Contemporary Collingwood, Until February 22**

In the 1980s, the artistic duo Rose Farrell and George Parkin produced parodic works based on Soviet Russian propaganda. Conceived just before Mikhail Gorbachev rose to power as General Secretary of the Communist Party, the

images prophetically foretold the loosening and dismantling of the totalitarian socialist regime.

Chillingly, these equivocal caricatures expressed the acquiescence of artists and scholars throughout the long decades of communist tyranny.

At Fehily Contemporary, Sonia Leber and David Chesworth revisit Russia and its tense ideological history. With the title of *Zaum Tractor*, the main work is a two-channel video comparing phases of Russian development in the last century.

True to the title, tractors feature in disconnected sequences, both rapid and slow, where the hero of agricultural progress is seen in black-and-white footage, sometimes with horses in the shot. We also see cylinders and a fiercely revolving crank shaft in the internal combustion engine.

These archival clips are contrasted with contemporary tractors racing in the country as competitive sport, which is unproductive and a waste of petrol. The juxtaposition represents one of the sadder sides of the collapse of ideology.

Where once machinery was seen as a way of liberating workers and animals from the yoke and tackle of manual labour, it's now become a symbol of vanity. Since the industrial revolution, machinery had boosted production several times and created the wealth of nations with the capital to develop it.

In most economies, however, a point is reached where the increase of production is matched by expanding consumption, promoting unnecessary levels of activity, spectacles and luxury. Increasingly defining the ideal of modern life, these artificial forms of consumption have been anxiously driven by marketing, promoting a zeal for higher standards of living and competitive ambition in families.

Communism proved that these energies are very hard to control, other than through poverty; and state-organised methods of having fun appear as fake and pompous as the soulless utopian architecture that Leber and Chesworth splice into their several sequences. In front of unapproachable buildings, performers chant in a strangely sonorous way. Even if you know some Russian, you won't be able to follow, because the words are conceived as autonomous sounds, detached from the meanings that the convention of language gives them.

Known as *Zaum*, this radical poetic technique was also developed in the spirit of liberation, as if abstracting the aural components of speech could result in a new vocal music that would no longer be tied to the expected significance of words. The very act of talking would be de-institutionalised.

The effect is both seductive and disorienting. You don't know if the declamatory utterances are displays of love or patriotism, wonder or anger.

In one allegory, a female yells in the ear of another. Then, with fine dance movements, this bully controls the submissive woman as if she were a spinning top.

With parallels to Dada and early abstraction, *Zaum* was both absurdist and political, idealistic and reformist, a flight towards new freedoms of intellect and tongue that would create the poetry for a future social and artistic autonomy.

In one performance, a man imitates the sounds of an early tractor, at times vigorous, catching onto the choke, and at other times spluttering and wheezing. Ironically, this gesture of imitation reverses the abstraction that language already creates for us, returning the tongue to some imaginary primitive stage of onomatopoeia.

Running for the better part of half an hour, the video has much beautiful photography, two examples of which are taken out as stills.

One comes from a sequence where beautiful young people scale the broken masonry of a ruined building. Wearing nothing but bathers, they perch precariously on ledges or beams; and every so often, one of them plunges into deep water below.

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*This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/sonia-leber--david-chesworths-zaum-tractor-diving-into-a-brave-new-world-20140204-31z0j.html>*