

Bulatov and the Swiss public

How is Erik Bulatov's art perceived by the Swiss public? It is really difficult to answer this question. Switzerland is made up of at least four different cultures linked to each of the national languages, multiplied by all the different geographical, linguistic, religious or economic factors. Switzerland is as much a puzzle as it is a country. To talk about receiving the work of a foreign/Russian artist on behalf of such a heterogeneous population is an "adventure" that seems perilous to me! I discovered Erik Bulatov's paintings at the Kunstmuseum in Bern in 1988, during the group exhibition "Ich lebe-Ich sehe" (I live-I see) of "non-conformist" Russian artists. Immediately I was fascinated by his work, and never forgot that first impression. In 2006, the idea came to me to contact him. Since our meeting, I have been representing his work.

Bulatov and the Swiss

Zurich-Berne-Moscow 1988. A context. An influential man.

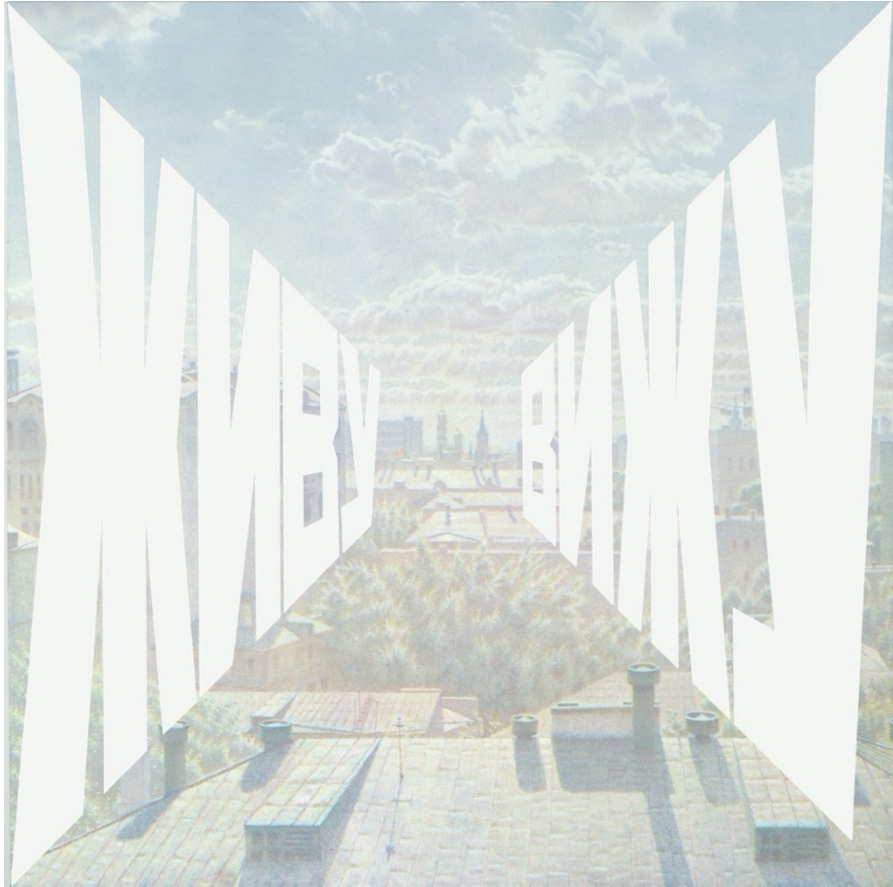
Switzerland, for historical, geographical and economic reasons, has been a country of refuge and a hub of international art since the beginning of the 20th century. In the 1970s and 1980s, while the official political capital was Bern, the most economically important city was Zurich, the country's financial and industrial center. Zurich is a city with a long tradition of trade and commerce, located in the middle of the European axis, and is Switzerland's largest city by population. The city owes its wealth to its universities, banks, and industrial fabric, based on its sense of economic initiative and its ability to integrate people from diverse backgrounds. Intellectually, it has an international reputation. Bern is a more conservative city, linked to the administration and rooted in its cultural traditions, but it also brings together a cultivated and open elite. Since the early 1960s, Bern has occupied a curiously important place in the contemporary art scene, with its Kunsthalle having an international aura under the bold and avant-garde direction of Harald Szeemann, Johannes Gachnang and Jean-Hubert Martin who have succeeded one another at its head. The local art scene was also lively at this time, with a new generation of artists such as Markus Raetz, Balthusard Burkhardt or Franz Gertsch.

In 1988, within a few months, in these two very close but really different cities, Erik Bulatov's career was about to begin. In January, at the newly created Kunsthalle Zurich, a very young collaborator, Claudia Jolles, was given the opportunity to organize the first solo exhibition of a virtually unknown Russian artist: Bulatov! At this date, he is 55 years old! A few months later, a large group exhibition "Ich lebe-Ich sehe" (the eponymous title of a Bulatov painting that will also serve as the emblem of the event) opens at the Kunstmuseum in Bern, bringing together "non-conformist" Russian artists.

Paul Jolles, at that time Secretary of State for the Economy, was a brilliant man, very influential politically (he is said to be the 8th Federal Councillor ...). Because of his official functions, he is often in Moscow, the economic affairs between the two countries, at that time, are very centralized. Paul Jolles is also a curious and wise collector. He is inevitably interested in the culture and art of the countries he visits. In Moscow, he discovered non-conformist artists, in his eyes much more lively and exciting than the representatives of official Soviet art. Not only is he interested in them as a collector, sometimes helping them financially, but he will also use his influence. He is the father of the young curator of the Kunsthalle in Zurich and he proposes to the director of the Kunstmuseum Bern, Hans Christoph von Tavel, to organize a group exhibition at his institution. At the time, organizing such events required not only support or agreements at a certain level in the Soviet Union, but also a favorable or at least relatively permissive political "climate".

Until the early 1980s, the Soviet authorities were more than reluctant to allow the works of artists they deemed unworthy of representing Soviet culture to be exhibited and exported. But at that time, the USSR was at a historical turning point and the central power had other priorities than to prevent the release of artists and despised works. Swiss institutions obtained the necessary authorizations. The two exhibitions are hyper important, both are "firsts". Their repercussions are international. The one in Bern will mark the careers of several participating artists, notably those of Kabakov and Vasiliev. For Bulatov as well, but his personal fame had begun a few months earlier: he will always speak of the Zurich exhibition as the most important one of his entire career! For him, the two Swiss events marked the beginning and the springboard to international recognition: exhibitions in Frankfurt, Paris, London and the United States soon followed.

History then accelerated. 1989 marks the fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening of the borders.



I live-I see / Je vis-Je vois, 1982, oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm

The specific political dimension of the exhibitions in Zurich and Bern. Their reception.

The exhibitions in Zurich and Bern were conceived in a specific political and historical context: East-West relations and tensions, antagonistic economic and ideological relations. Obviously, the Western "support" for the critical dimension of non-conformism could not be described as "disinterested". The term "non-conformist" did not cover a specific artistic practice, it was not a constituted movement. This term, which I will describe as summary and fairly broad in its acceptance, allowed for a fairly rapid classification, and it quickly became a fairly effective "marketing" argument as well. When I visited the exhibition in Bern, faced with the works, it was obvious that the artists did not belong to a formally linked group! Moreover, this late discovery and the "support" of the Western world for some "non-conformist" artists nevertheless made it possible to highlight artists of first importance (Kabakov, Bulatov). But initially, this grouping could also, in part, be the basis for a simplistic misunderstanding. Bulatov is not a polemist or an activist at all!

Erik Bulatov's painted work counts only three hundred paintings. This modest figure is due to the artist's demand for quality and precision, intensity and intention. Practically every painting is preceded by drawings, each one being a research, a variant of the subject studied, all possibilities are tried, verified, they are attempts to approach the inner vision of the artist, at the same time a systematic, sensitive and intuitive research. If we quickly fly over the painted subjects, Bulatov's "iconography" has three recurring elements: landscapes (sky, nature, urban view), portraits and the use of words. These elements can be either distinct, a landscape or a single word, or "associated" in the painting in interaction/presence. Bulatov can formally move from abstraction to figuration. This freedom, this independence of choice is linked to the intention of the subject, of the subject, but beyond these formal questions, in the end all the fundamental concerns of his work come together, overlap.

But I believe that what has objectively been the mark of recognition of Bulatov's work is the peculiar, singular use of words (and typography) in the painting, this was, in my opinion, a fundamental formal and conceptual discovery. Totally new! The use of letters or words in the painting is not recent: the Cubists, the Dadaists had also used it very freely in painting and collages at the beginning of the century. In the graphic arts, the letter and the words, by their typography (their character!) even, by their size, by their location are constituent elements of

advertising and propaganda. Posters, especially those of the railroads of the early Soviet era left a lasting impression on the young artist. Formally, an international art movement, pop art, which literally feeds on advertising, will trigger reflection and interest in Bulatov.



Here / Ici, 2001, oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm

In advertising, the letter and the word intervene graphically on the surface of the support. In Bulatov, the word and its reality, the word and the context are the picture. The word is not on the painting, it is in the painting, it is the body and meaning of the painting, it belongs to the image. In the painting "Sky-Sea", we see simultaneously a representation of the sky and the sea as well as the two written words, the latter "covering" the part they designate. The representation of reality and the written words "statements" are absolutely inseparable, (one sees, reads and pronounces at the same time), one is not more important or real than the others! The represented landscape becomes one with its statement / its stated reality, the relation of the two elements (representation-words), the visual and conceptual game takes the viewer's gaze and mind into the space of the painting. This formal proposal is absolutely original and singular. The visual poetry is born from the meeting and the interweaving of the two elements.



Sky-Sea / Ciel-Mer, 1985, oil on canvas, 200 × 200 cm

As a reminder, in the representation of landscapes alone, Bulatov refers and pays homage to a great tradition of painting by perpetuating and re-playing it. By analyzing and integrating the forms of painting of his time (pop art or abstraction among others) and formally re-inventing them with his particular, singular and original "use" of words, by re-investing them, by redefining the aim of the painting, Bulatov is an important creator who is fully in line with modernity.



Moscow Window / Fenêtre à Moscou, 1995, oil on canvas, 190 × 140 cm

Bulatov uses perspective. Most of his paintings are human-sized, with a preference for the square format of 2 m by 2 m. The painting therefore has a human dimension, the scale of a body (one must see him manipulating his large canvases alone in his studio, refusing any help!). According to Richter "Ein Bild sollte nicht mehr grösser als ein Bett sein" (A painting should not be larger than a bed). Bulatov made this his credo. The painting can hold us! According to his belief and will, the painting offers a space that does not stop at its surface. Bulatov is a master of perspective, which opens up an unlimited imaginary space for us that stands outside of material and temporal contingencies. At the same time, perspective literally brings us back to our "point of view", literally and figuratively! At the same time, the painting reminds us of our physical location, anchored in reality, but also allows us to access a mental and philosophical dimension. The painting is an interface between two worlds, the limited and constrained reality and an infinite space of freedom, that of our mind.



Road / Route, 1994-96, oil on canvas, 160 × 100 cm

I am convinced that Bulatov's works touch and concern everyone, regardless of their cultural, social or geographical origin. Like any good artist, he succeeds in including in his paintings ideas, sensations, elements of life. Bulatov began to create in the Soviet Union, then in the West. In his paintings, certain geographical, political, social references have certainly evolved, sometimes changed depending on the context, but the constant search for freedom, this requirement and this quest are exactly the same! For Bulatov, but also for any spectator sensitive to painting, regardless of language and culture of origin. Bulatov certainly fits precisely and inescapably into the history of Russian art, but his work goes beyond borders, in its quality, in its intention, in its expression, it speaks to us of questions that each of us, human, can feel. While testifying to the time and place where it is made. For a painter like Bulatov, the search for light and space is certainly a philosophical quest. In this sense, I would say that Bulatov's work is truly ambitious: to bear witness to his time by aiming at timelessness! Or according to Goethe's summarized formula, to create a work "now and forever".



I am going / Je m'en vais, 1975, oil on canvas, 230 × 230 cm

Who is artistically close to Bulatov? Again, I don't know, but I would tend to say that for any great artist, another great artist is necessarily a kind of close! Often, beyond questions of ego, artists recognize each other. If you ask Erik Bulatov, he will certainly tell you about Oleg Vassiliev, a friend and companion on the road and at work during the Soviet years. Erik always loved, respected Vasiliev's work saying that he was, for him, one of the most important in 20th century Russian painting. Erik Bulatov and Oleg Vasiliev are basically painters. Obsessed with questions of light and space.

If one looks superficially, there is an obvious formal coincidence between the work of Ed Ruscha and Bulatov. Both, practically at the same time, tens of thousands of kilometers apart, living in totally opposite political, cultural and economic systems, both produced canvases using vanishing points, letters in perspective, juxtaposing words and elements of reality! The two men did not know each other, they never met and were totally unaware of each other's work. At the end of the 80s, through their fame and the reproductions of images that were circulating, the two men became aware of each other's existence. I know that Bulatov, when he discovered Ruscha's work, was astonished and very interested. And totally respectful. I think I can say that the feelings were mutual. Proof of this is that a few years ago, together with a German gallery owner representing Ruscha, we tried to organize an exhibition that would show the similarities and differences between the two men. This project, unfortunately not yet completed, had the agreement of both artists. This exhibition remains to be done!