AES+F:  
THE REVOLUTION STARTS NOW!  

INTERPRETIVE GUIDE
THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND ART MUSEUM, BRISBANE, 9 JULY – 29 AUGUST 2010
AES+F’s recent works Last Riot 2 (2005-2007) and The Feast of Trimalchio (2009) – both the moving and still images included in this exhibition – are full of idealised beauty, youth, style, progress and wealth. The heroic glory of revolution that was celebrated during Stalin’s era is no longer their ambition. As artists of a post-Stalinist generation, AES+F’s vision is alert to the human failings that so often derail the long-term ideals of revolution. AES+F skilfully employs the tools of persuasion developed by today’s fashion and advertising industry to seduce the viewer with spectacular CG-enhanced panoramas peopled, primarily, by the unblemished young. However, underscoring the work is a critique of progress and global consumption, as well as the hedonistic excesses of those who hold power and wealth. AES+F turns the utopian visual language of early twentieth-century Socialist Realism – and shared sources from earlier visual culture – into an ambitious counter-revolutionary attack on society’s complacency.

Nick Mitzevich, Exhibition Curator

ABOUT THIS INTERPRETIVE GUIDE

This interpretive guide is intended for use in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition AES+F: THE REVOLUTION STARTS NOW! by the contemporary Russian artist collective, AES+F. This free resource aims to enhance audience understanding of the exhibition and interpretation of the practice of AES+F, and may be used by visitors prior to, during or following a visit to this exhibition. Alternatively, this online guide may be used for independent e-learning experiences, to provide content and direction for a case study on the work of the AES+F for tertiary students, senior high school students and teachers.

The information and activities in this interpretive guide are intended to support the inquiry learning model of the Queensland Visual Art senior curriculum and align with the general objectives of making and appraising. This guide provides opportunities for Year 11 and 12 senior students to:

- extend their knowledge and experience of contemporary visual arts practice and career paths;
- develop their capacity to research, develop, resolve and reflect on their own and others’ art works in the specific context of audiences and purposes; and
- explore how the visual arts reinforce and challenge their own individual experiences.

Gillian Ridsdale, Curator Public Programs
AES+F is a Moscow-based artist collective that produces large-scale animated video installations, paintings, photography and sculpture. The name AES+F come from the initials of each member’s last name: Tatiana Arzamasova, Lev Evzovich, Evgeny Svyatsky (who started working together in 1987 as AES) and Vladimir Fridkes (who joined the group in 1995). All four artists were born in and live and work in Moscow, Svyatsky sharing his time between Moscow and New York.

Tatiana Arzamasova (b. 1955) graduated from the State Architectural Institute in 1978 and participated in exhibitions of conceptual architecture in London, Paris and Venice. Lev Evzovich (b. 1958) is also a trained architect and a graduate of the State Architectural Institute. Like Arzamasova he practised conceptual architecture and has participated in conceptual architecture exhibitions in Milan, Frankfurt and Paris. Evzovich has also worked as a designer and director of animated films. Evgeny Svyatsky (b. 1957) graduated from the Book Design Faculty of the Moscow Printing Institute and worked as a designer in publishing and advertising, as well as being the creative director of a number of Moscow publishers. The fourth member of the group, Vladimir Fridkes (b. 1956), has worked as a photographer for fashion magazines, including Vogue, Harper’s Bazaar, ELLE, Marie Claire, Cosmopolitan and Sunday Times Style.

AES+F is often described as a post-Soviet artist collective. While all four artists were born following the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, their work recalls the heroic imagery of official Soviet art, known as Socialist Realism. By the time the group formed in 1987, the possibilities for Russian artists were broadening and, for the first time in decades, Russian art was starting to be seen abroad. Combining references to Soviet art, European art history and the world of advertising and high fashion, AES+F crafts elaborate allegories of human folly. The contemporary spectacles they create seduce the viewer with their opulence and excessive beauty, while also commenting on global greed and consumption, and a new-found Russian capitalism.
Working in collaboration, the four artists create a concept, discuss the story and decide on the best way to proceed. This could involve photography, video, installation, or a combination of all of the above, including images referencing contemporary fashion, film and television.

AES+F

We just use any techniques according to the ideas of the project so we can use very traditional bronze sculptures and porcelain and also digitally manipulated video and prints. They are all tools.

(AES+F, 2008, The Art Newspaper)
AES+F make their Trimalchio into a luxury hotel, the ultimate expression of Western decadence. The visitors laze about in digitally created environments, including a ski resort and a tropical island setting, their movements are stylized, slow and languid, as though their wealth and beauty is a drug. However, despite the hotel’s endless pleasures, disaster is inevitable and paradise is continually destroyed only to be made afresh for the next set of visitors. As Jacqueline Milner writes: “Even when pierced with an arrow or running from certain catastrophe – tsunami, nuclear explosion or alien attack – their catwalk poise remains; no faces are contorted in anguish, no unseemly cries for help rise from their throats. It is as if these catastrophes were on an equal footing with the social sport, fine food and pristine vistas, integral to the tourist package to make the unadulterated pleasure all the more exquisite. And these apocalyptic events are run as efficiently as everything else – a clean genocidal wave ends the revellers’ holiday indulgence, gracefully washing the decadence away so that a new generation of guests can be accommodated.

AES+F

We searched for an analogue in the third millennium and Trimalchio, the former slave, the nouveau riche host of feasts lasting several days, appeared to us not so much as an individual as a collective image of a luxurious hotel, a temporary paradise which one has to pay to enter.

(AES+F, 2009, translated by Ruth Addison)
AES+F has singled out tourism as the phenomenon that best captures the alienation and inequality of the post-globalised world. Tourism as an experience trades on the illusion of cultural exchange, but offers an insipid alternative leached of all the risk, discomfort and confrontation that accompanies genuine contact; instead of cultural dialogue what most often results is a form of cultural appropriation”.

(Extract from catalogue essay AES+F’s The Feast of Trimalchio by Jacqueline Milner).

FOCUS QUESTIONS

RESOLVING
Carefully re-read Jacqueline Milner’s catalogue essay. What are the key ideas she is discussing? Can you think of other characters in recent novels, films or on television that could be compared to the ancient character of Trimalchio?

DEVELOPING
Consider creating a body of work inspired by a holiday experience of your own that was not what you expected. Does the luxury resort represented in The Feast of Trimalchio remind you of anywhere you have ever been or heard about?

RESPONDING
Art writer Michael Hutack describes The Feast of Trimalchio as “a dazzling venture, using scale to dominate and intimidate the audience; using volume both in space and sound to draw a direct correlation with the power relations it puts on display”. What are your feelings when you first encounter The Feast of Trimalchio?

DEVELOPING
Locate your favourite still from The Feast of Trimalchio and make a quick sketch to capture the key compositional aspects of the work.
AES+F Last Riot 2, 2005–2006. Stills from three-channel HD video. Private Collection, Australia. Reproduced courtesy of the artists and Triumph Gallery, Moscow © AES+F

What AES+F show us in Last Riot is a world unmoored from human meaning, a world without end. We simply watch the same death and destruction occur again and again without any sense that it will one day stop or that we can do anything about it. So much so that, when the flight of rockets takes off at the end, it appears not so much apocalyptic as merely the prelude to events that have already occurred.

(Extract from catalogue essay No Future by Rex Butler)

LAST RIOT

As in The Feast of Trimalchio, where the end of paradise is played out time and time again, the end of the world is eternally rehearsed in Last Riot. The choice of the title is ironic, as Rex Butler writes:

“…we return each time to the same group of adolescents engaging in an elaborate mimicry of violent gestures: holding a knife to another's throat, plunging a sword into another's body, letting off an imaginary round of gun fire. We come back to the same scene again and again throughout the video, but the action never seems to progress.

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(Extract from catalogue essay No Future by Rex Butler)
AES+F

We wanted to make compositions reminiscent of Mannerist and Baroque painting and especially Caravaggio but also to construct a virtual world which refers to contemporary virtual culture and virtual reality and all these kinds of computer games, video games and Hollywood movies; it’s a landscape that is continuous throughout and goes from a desert at night to a snowy morning in the mountains. We feel that contemporary visual culture is very similar to that of the Baroque: everything is extremely expressive, figurative and very visual and founded on images and at the same time very decadent. We try to make it seductive but when you make it too beautiful it begins to be ugly so we are also trying to establish the border between ugliness and beauty. It is also not clear who is the good guy and who is the bad guy and it is very important to us that it should not be clear.

(AES+F, 2008, The Art Newspaper)
The screening of video art has been prolific at the Venice and Sydney Biennales in recent years. AES+F have participated in several international biennales, including the Venice Biennale in 2007 and 2009, and the Sydney Biennale in 2010. The Feast of Trimalchio is being exhibited at the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, Moscow, in June 2010.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

RESPONDING
How does the experience of viewing the work of AES+F differ from viewing static works of art? Give your overall response to the exhibition. Did you like it or dislike it? Why?

REFLECTING
Writer and film-maker Chris Kraus has said that “video enacts a collapsed and continuous present”. In your own words evaluate this statement with specific reference to AES+F, and using examples from Last Riot and The Feast of Trimalchio.

DEVELOPING
Imagine you have been appointed the curator of a major international art exhibition or biennale. Write a brief summary of the themes that you would address in your exhibition and propose a list of artists for consideration. Would you include the work of AES+F in your exhibition? Give your exhibition an overall title that expresses your ideas.
FURTHER READING

AES+F http://www.aes-group.org/tfot.asp
AES+F http://triumph-gallery.com/artists/aes+f/
AES+F http://www.claireoliver.com/artists.html?artist_no=3&bio=1
AES+F http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQlaKBjYnQ&feature=related


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