

MARIA LOBODA
DYNAMITE WINTER PALACE
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The title Dynamite Winter Palace triggers ambivalent feelings of decadence and revolt, offering, as it does, the key to a message in the nineteenth-century Russian nihilist cipher used (somehow inefficiently) by members of the haute bourgeoisie to organise their emancipation from tsarist power. As a codified system, this linguistic remnant of revolt cannot avoid a sort of aesthetics of dissolution – a paradox explored in Maria Loboda's latest work. She locates her art between the present time and the traces of fissures in systems of power, whether political, artistic, or aesthetic.

She recently denied the presence of nostalgia in her work: "Because I don't like the weakness of nostalgia, I want to give those worn-out systems their power back, sort of an eternal danger, like buried atomic waste, which is still radiating underneath the surface of a complex modern world. This obsolete material will never disappear. It was thought, named, used, believed in and the only possibility for me to underline its value is to underline its potential hazard" (1). She finds it essential to compose an underlying narrative, testing the relationship by spinning it out. The belief that we are still caught between the lines of history implies the staging of its latent dangers, as one final test of efficiency. Thus Maria Loboda has set a table for a luxurious dinner in one of the exhibition rooms, with 118 napkins, suggesting an enigma. In fact, the artist has encoded a mysterious message in the biliteral cipher invented by Francis Bacon, applied to objects as a way of stating that "anything can be signified by anything". The code uses a binary system, grouping pairs of elements by groups of five to match two objects or two signs with all the letters of the alphabet. Objects, like signs, can thus hold hidden meaning. The message "That's how every empire falls" is hidden in two different textures of the napkin rings, giving the work its title. These little objects of trivial efficiency, used to assemble and unite, thus break the unity of the scene. One can imagine powerful men and women dining here, without realising that the system on which their "empire" rests holds the seeds of its own destruction.

Maria Loboda draws on oblique narratives to develop new thinking on aesthetics and the role of meaning in the delicate balance between order and chaos. Eight cut-out letters blend into a marbled wallpaper, offer a discreet contribution by forming the intriguing "word" O.U.O.S.V.A.V.V. This is a medieval cryptogram whose solution has been lost for good. The message, a trigger for the imagination, has in fact become its own solution. As a story-teller, Maria Loboda draws attention away from the meaning and towards the code that holds it, providing an intricate reading of Marshall McLuhan's lapidary assertion that the medium is the message. She is interested in both the objectification of a powerful logical structure and the means by which it can be undermined, and as such explores the importance of the catalyst. She borrows Turgenev's fictional character description of "Curious and cold epicurean young ladies", for the second installation in the first room. What is important here is the potential for destruction. An elegant, platinum plated flask filled with hydrogen is placed solitarily against the wall. Platinum is a powerful catalyst in the presence of hydrogen and oxygen, causing explosions. The title defines the only character capable to break the nihilism of the hero of *Fathers and Sons*, Yevgeny Bazarov. The rejection that Anna – the curious new breed of young woman – inflicts on the protagonist acts as a catalyst, accelerating the self-destructive potential of an intellectual construction intended to demolish all other systems. The risky combination of otherwise inoffensive elements also lies behind the work "Ah, Wilderness". The installation consists of branches from four different trees – cedar, pine, walnut and birch – in a somewhat baroque arrangement. If those species would grow undisturbed in their natural environment, they would destroy one another, as each of them is highly monocultural. Throughout the exhibition, antagonistic elements are arranged together in an order that, while appearing purely ornamental

on the surface, reflects Maria Loboda's broader programme of using life to destabilise life.

(1) In an interview with Michelle Cotton in cura. magazine, 1 March 2011 (<http://www.cura-magazine.com>).

(Text by Joana Neves / translated by Susan Pickford)