

STEPHANIE SANDLER

Anna Alchuk (1955–2008)

Some ten days after she disappeared in March, 2008, Anna Alchuk was found dead in a lake near her home in Berlin. There were theories of suicide, foul play, and terrible accident, but no explanation could possibly console those who admired Alchuk's poetry, artwork, aesthetic acumen, and peerless energy as an organizer of radical cultural events. She was only 52 years old, and the loss was stunning. It is all the worse because of the way Alchuk's death seemed inevitably connected to a scandal in Moscow: as one of the organizers of the Sakharov Museum's exhibit *Caution: Religion* (2003), Alchuk had endured criticism that became a form of harassment. The exhibit was vilified by extremists, who defaced several of the art works. But the police, rather than pursuing these wrongdoers, turned on the exhibit organizers and called them provocateurs. Alchuk was brought up on charges of inciting religious hatred. That gesture seemed born of a Kafkaesque inversion where a crime victim is put on trial. In the end, she was found not guilty of any crime, but the experience left her devastated. Anyone who believed that she might have taken her own life could well argue that she was driven to it by the terrible experience of the trial. Her husband, the philosopher Mikhail Ryklin, suggested as much. He published a series of terrifying dreams his wife recorded during the years after her trial: they show her feeling victimized, harassed, and, saddest of all, entirely abandoned.

Ryklin, a brilliant theorist of social and mental life, penned a staggering indictment of Russian officials in his account of his wife's death. The article, "In the Burning House," includes a disturbing statement of the psychology of the scapegoat, and it is meant to explain how as unlikely a suicide as Anna Alchuk could have been brought to take her own life:

In an authoritarian social climate, a person who is declared guilty begins slowly but surely to think of himself as guilty. He *internalizes the guilt*, not because all others around him are convinced of his guilt (he has friends, even if they can no longer offer their help), but because he was charged as guilty by an authority which speaks in the name of everyone. And so everyone, regardless of whether they think the smear victim is guilty or not, will behave towards him as if his guilt had been long

established. The chosen scapegoat begins, with time, to inscribe the guilt into his own body. (<http://www.signandsight.com/features/1733.html>)

Alchuk's own work as a performance artist and an organizer of exhibits, web sites, and other means of artistic production also explores the connections between social psychology and individual behavior, particularly with regard to gender. She was ever keen to resist the dulling effects of social conformity and economic deprivation, and her response was always to demonstrate vital alertness to the possibilities for transformation in the world around her.

Her reputation may for now be dominated by her senselessly tragic ending, but surely her legacy should be built around the remarkable achievements found in five published books of poetry, extensive work as a photographer and political activist, and in many performances, lectures, installations, and staged "happenings." To survey her work is to witness a free-spirited romp across complex and significant ideas about personhood, identity, representation, linguistic performance, and political action. It is also to recognize her splendid sense of humor, and her boldness in shaping texts and images that dare us to see the past and the present entirely anew. In the 1990s Alchuk published a review article entitled "The Art of Surprise." She may as well have been describing her own gift with that phrase.

Alchuk's contribution to what some would call the neo-avant-garde in twentieth-century Russian culture is significant, and she takes her place alongside a group of visual and performance poets like Sergei Biriukov and Sergei Sigei. One might compare their exploration of verbal text and visual imagery with the work of the American poet Susan Howe, for example, or Steve McCaffery. Alchuk's Russian books are not available in English translation, but they should be named, since the translated titles show the range of her thinking: they include *Twelve Rhythmical Pauses* (1994), *Com 7letely* (1994), *Movement* (1999), *57577: An Exchange of Letters in the Form of Traditional Japanese Poetry* (2004, co-authored with Natalia Lazareva), and *ne BU: Poems 2000–2004* (2005). One of these titles has all the verbal wit that characterizes Alchuk's poems: *Com 7letely*, and my translation that tries to replicate the punning genius of her coinage, *Sov sem*. Hers is a two-word title that splits in half the word for "completely," yielding the first syllable of "Soviet" plus a second word that means "seven." My version can only point at her inventiveness, although happily the shape of the number "7" lets the coinage in English make its own strange sense.

Language ever surprises us, as she shows in her poems and images. In one image, currently available on the web (<http://www.artsalon.ru/artists/alchuk/>), we see three line drawings that show in very simplified form an image associated with “yesterday,” (in the top left), “today” (top right), and “tomorrow” (center bottom). The pun comes in the word for tomorrow, Russian “zavtra.” She adds a “k” to it, producing “zavtrak,” which means “breakfast,” and her picture thus shows two people at a table. Alchuk loved this kind of stylized primitive drawing, as we also see in an angular self-portrait she did as a child (same link). Remarkably, she accompanied this image with the terse information that she drew her last self-portrait at the age of nine. Both of these images and the commentary were submitted for a project by Larisa Kashuk, *From the Artist’s Point of View*, 1997, which is where one finds them on the internet. Perhaps asked for a self-portrait by Kashuk, Alchuk produced instead a portrait of the artist as a child, captioned with the implicit statement that self-portraits were now impossible. The seriousness with which the young woman looks out at an observer is arresting. It betrays thoughtfulness and maturity that run deeper than the quick strokes of the drawing might suggest, and it shows us that even as the child she claims to be in this drawing, Alchuk could invest her image-making with multiple meanings and remarkable self-assurance.

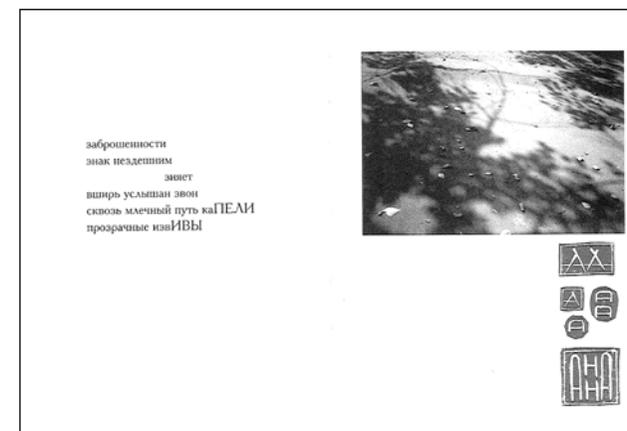
Alchuk has written of her work, “My poems are performative. They exist in the space of a virtual theater where the clay of language is constantly being softened and worked.” The choice of a child’s self-portrait for Kashuk’s collection is of course a species of performance, but for her more generally in her poetry, the key is rhythm. Thus she compared her efforts to those of a jazz improviser, taking up a new melody in each poem but following the beat of a rhythm established in the opening phrases.

As the critic Elena Madden has put it, “Alchuk is one of those writers whose poetic language and poetic discourse have developed the traits of a body—of flesh, of blood. Her words have returned from the kingdom of the shades.” To an English-only listener, that last comparison may seem unmotivated, but the critic has something specific in mind: Alchuk’s poetic discourse has returned from the brink of the elegy, from elegy’s Mandelstamian passion for remembering the dry river and the black ice, as one of his poems puts it. No more the coldness of Styx, no more swallows with lacerated wings, none in fact of the famous Mandelstam imagery on which the twentieth-century elegy solidified its foundation in Russian. Instead, the words themselves are the images, they dance before us in letters large and small, and they dare to be in turn playful and dramatic,

bold and graceful, ironic and lyrical.

The irony almost always comes from sound play. Alchuk loved puns. She liked to use bits of words in all caps or with parentheses, setting them off to reveal meanings hidden in little-noticed letter combinations. Often these played against the grain of etymology, connecting syllables in ways that had nothing to do with how meanings evolve, instead foregrounding the fanciful connections that could be made by serendipity. This rhetorical trait makes her poetry almost impossible to translate, but one can imagine the equivalent—a line of poetry with letters seeming to make two sets of words, something like “a pHOTographed WILLow, constRAINED.” These particular words aren’t her creations, they’re mine, but they are meant to simulate the eruption of words within words as she so often presents them. As here, a secondary plot is suggested in even a poetic line of three or four words (and often her lines are quite short).

Alchuk also loved palindromes, as in a line from 57577: “Roma – amor (e).” The 5-line, 31-syllable *tanka* poem goes on to speak of the sea (in Russian, more, which in turn emerges from the sounds of the first line, its “m” and “r” sounds), of distance and joy and the pleasure of hearing another’s voice. That book, 57577, is worth readers without Russian seeking out, for its look and its images will be legible across all barriers of language, and there are occasional words or lines written in Latin letters, as in the line “Roma – amor (e).” Co-authored with Natalia Azarova, this book places a poem across the page from an image. Azarova’s poems face lovely pen and ink drawings done by her frequent partner Aleksei Lazarev, but Alchuk’s poems face photographs she took herself. Each of them shows some interestingly patterned shadow—leaves or fancy iron grill-work on a sidewalk, shutters that hide the light, trees in rippled water.



The texture interests the poet as much as the contrasts of gray, and the delicacy works in beautiful tandem with the *tanka* form that both poets use throughout the book (hence the title, 57577, counting out the syllables allowed for each of the tanka's five lines). Alchuk's photographs were exhibited separately as "Light Shadows."

Alchuk was a compelling reader of others' work, as her reviews of art exhibits and books demonstrate. She was particularly attuned to the work of women, and she was more broadly interested in the psychology of gender identity. She wrote a review of the Russian translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* in which she neither excused the author her blind spots nor diminished the book's massive significance. She astutely praised the book for its refusal to idealize women, a value that the clear-sighted Alchuk could not underestimate. A co-editor of the Russian volume *Women and Visual Signs* (2000), Alchuk also created a website, <http://www.owl.ru/avangard/>, focused on women and innovation in Russia. It hosted contributions from a range of scholars and thinkers.

The response to Alchuk's death shows that she left a profound mark on the lives of those who knew her. In some cases the effect was purely aesthetic and intellectual, as seen in the fine analyses of her work in the leading Russian literary journal *New Literary Review* published within months of her death. But her effect was also personal. She was remembered in a memorial tribute in *The Russian Journal* by poets and artists who spoke lovingly of her presence in the seminars they organized in one another's apartments, at public readings, and in chance encounters. Tatiana Daniliants described her as oddly mixing professorial seriousness with responsiveness to all around her—a capacity to give others the opportunity to find their own voices. Yuri Evgrafov remembered her brilliant mind, and her warmth, honesty, and utter absence of posing. Sergei Biriukov evoked her infectious laugh and the gift of her friendship. I never knew Anna Alchuk, but as I read these words about her by her friends, and when I read and reread her work, I regret her death all the more. It is a loss to us all.

PATRICK JAMES DUNAGAN

"A consistently useful measure:" Robert Creeley's Writing / Reading of Wallace Stevens

William Carlos Williams is the immediate literary predecessor associated with the early work of Robert Creeley; but, Wallace Stevens makes several appearances in the printed record, beginning in Creeley's first letters in the early 1950s to the poet Charles Olson and re-emerging in his later work. References to Stevens culminate in the final section of Creeley's long poem "Histoire de Florida," published in 1996, the beginning of the last decade of his life. In it, lines from Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar" (a poem which, as will be shown, remained central to Creeley throughout his life) are quoted alternating with Creeley's own. Although Creeley admits, "much of [his] own initial writing, both prose and poetry, used Stevens as a model" ("The the," 121), the earliest direct reference in poetry does not appear until decades later, in the poem "For John Duff" from his 1979 collection *Later*. It summons from the very same Stevens poem the line "I placed a jar in Tennessee. . ." as an initiating stance (*Collected*, 169).

These references to Stevens expand and reflect on Creeley's belief that, as he put it, "Stevens, in Williams' phrase, thought with his poem" ("In respect," 50). In these later works, Creeley directly contradicts statements he made in the 1950s in letters to Charles Olson: the force Wallace Stevens had on Creeley's own "thought" is at last reflected in the lines of his work. Drawing attention to this gradual emergence of references to Stevens adds a new dimension to our understanding of the effect that Stevens had upon Creeley's ongoing development as a poet, and also contributes to a broader contextualization of influence between older and younger generations of poets.

Creeley's familiarity with the work of Stevens dates back to his undergraduate years at Harvard in the 1940s, where he worked as an editor for the *Harvard Wake*. Stevens "came through" for the Spring issue of 1946 with his poem, "Late Hymn from the Myrrh Mountain" beginning, as Creeley recalls, "Unsnack your snood, madanna. . ." Williams, too, was in that issue ("In respect," 50). In an interview with Lynn Keller, Creeley recalls that, throughout the late forties and up into the first years of the following decade, he "was very struck by Wallace Stevens' thinking and trying to write in his manner" (26). In these early years of his development,