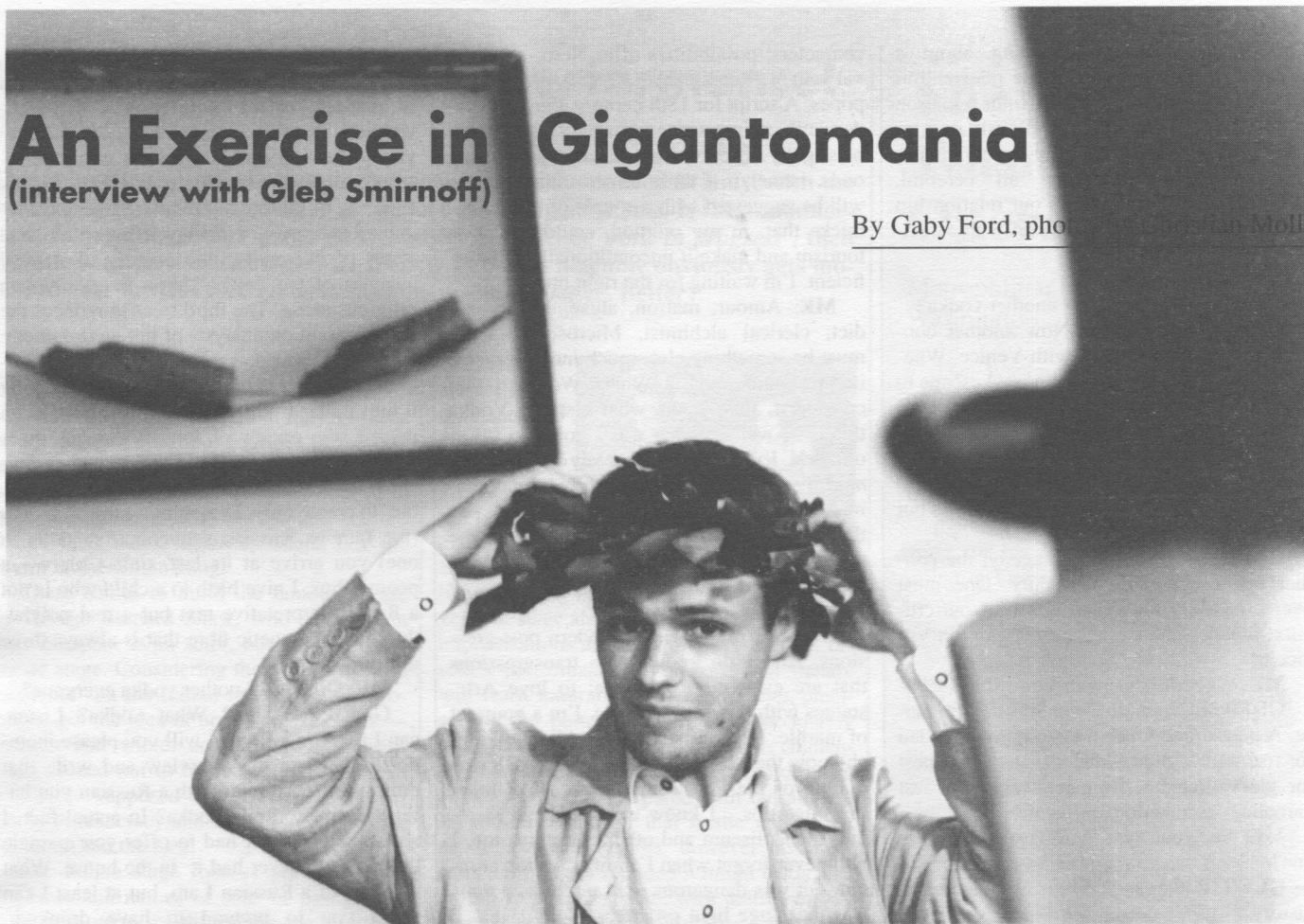


An Exercise in Gigantomania

(interview with Gleb Smirnoff)

By Gaby Ford, photo by [unreadable]



After rescuing ourselves from a warmish August rain (hip-hopping over the Roman cobblestones and exalting, sandals in hand) my comely German photographer also all soaked, led me at last to quite an unassuming door and, God, there we dropped anchor in a railroad flat replete with tapestries and coats of arms in the middle of which reposed an Empire chaise longue à la Madame Récamier ... only to finish in a Spartan chaos cluttered with books, manuscripts and photographs. Manoeuvring between objects, I was beckoned by our smiling host to join him at the bay window. Skipping "Hi," he proffered me a glass of vodka. "Anti-flu!" he added, handing over a pair of elegant binoculars. "Stolen from the Bolshoi!" he added again, as if pleading guilt.

GLEB: Look down at the streets and the Romans under the rain! Real entertainment. Panic, mourning, bewilderment... As if they are yelling revenge at the Heavens instead of applauding, considering a prevalent boredom within the Roman sky. A pity: they are no longer lovers of the extraordinary and, what is worse, they even happen to lack municipal pragmatism: at least the streets get a free-of-charge scrub. ...But let us leave the Romans in peace! Better look at the paving stones, *san pietrini* as they call them... What I want you to see now is the charming sinuosity of the Via Panisperna; look at it from here!... sliding over three out of those *Seven Hills* of Rome, Esquilina, Viminal and the Capitol, it slithers like an adder epidermis... and its scales are visible only under the rain.

ME: Bottoms up!(finishing the vodka). I see you do love Rome!

GLEB: No joke. Not a sweet love to be precise, rather a fatal matrimony. What else should we, "the late Europeans" do, rather than swear on Rome in the name of our proper history? Meanwhile, in my case, the romance opened with an enthusiastic prelude — visionary, I should say — alluring me to design... what a match, ah?! A bachelor depicting his *femme fatale* through Svetonius, Plutarch, Gibbon, Stendhal... *mito Roma insomma* ...and, of course, Hoffmann's *Princess Brambilla*, above all.

ME: But Hoffmann was a German Romantic. As a Russian, what is your Roman syndrome?

GLEB: My certainty is that Rome exists. This sensation relaxes a Russian who has just buried his own empire. But he has done so twice this century. The fall of the last emperor through our grandparents' reminiscences and, now, my own witnessing of the fall of the Soviet Empire. A modern Russian, exhausted by all his empires' collapses, bets, actually clutches at straws of the last existing absolute monarchy: the Catholic Church. Just enough to be idealistic.

ME: Is it because of this idealism that you have taken up studying Philosophy with the Jesuits?

GLEB: Only with them can I find Rome, philosophically. Rome, you know, was founded some time ago, but never philosophically. I am sure the Jesuits will lead me to understand the philosophical stones on which Ro-

me lies. And now I owe you the rest of that long "Roman-tic story" in which I entrapped myself... But maybe I am only the last one in a long line, one of the last adepts of the *Grand Tour* idea. I pronounce that with an English accent in honour to Horace Walpole who pioneered the fashion of didactic trips abroad... just to give you some examples: in order to learn dance one went to Paris; to learn history, the culture of melancholy or *Weltschmerz* one went to Rome... Writers contributed to this march, like the famous letters of Lord Chesterfield to his son instructing him what sort of Latin to speak in Rome, or how to kiss properly a hand in France, etc., or Madame de Staël who with *Corinne or L'Italie* burnt the golden youth for the cult of "Going to Italy." So, before leaving I gave a huge farewell party, the kind you can still only have in Moscow... let me put it clear, you go out one night and you come back home after a week's adventures. Just imagine, I thought Rome had the same thing!, considering that slight chapter by Petronius, the Satyricon. I think I should consider starting a course on how to give a party. My pupils shall commence with the Ancients, in order to reach them...

ME: So, you're disillusioned? Instead of a carnival, you hunt a lushful basket full of boredom!

GLEB: Yes, quite a precious one, the one which possesses its value... And, in terms of our long erotic metaphor, may you explain to me the enigma that... after all this spell which Rome casts from a distance, ...you re-

member the bachelor dreaming about a beauty? Ah, here we are! ...the poor enthusiast shows up at the date and finds a matron in his arms, ...lazy and marvellously provincial. Yet, I almost put a ring on my finger. Engaged. A heavy story, all cerebral. Between us... (he whispers) our relationship has turned out murky, equipped with a reciprocal betrayal.

ME: Betrayal?

CHRISTIAN: Time for another vodka?

GLEB: Key word! ...Now another confession: frequent adultery with Venice. Whenever I can't stand Rome anymore I escape to Venice. I do return to my magnetic better half, with my cast-down eyes, beseeching pardon. But I ask for leniency. Venice is constantly whispering in my ears.

ME: So you don't stick to the mistress but go back to the matron?

GLEB: A neo-classical tragedy: the conflict between passion and duty. One must overcome the latter. Rome is a duty, our crucifix. Besides, the laurel doesn't grow in Venice.

ME: What *does* grow in Venice?

GLEB: Effeminate algae all over the place. A pleasure to touch them but not intended for real males; those valiant gents who quest for glory. Besides, Roman dust is the best narcotic for a reactionary like me.

ME: So, your syndrome is a reactionary one?

GLEB: Rather a syndrome of an addict to history.

ME: You really think history dwells in Rome?

GLEB: *Non nel bacino della mamma Roma, ma sulla sedia del Vaticano!* (Not in Rome, but in the Vatican!, would be the approximate translation, but I suggest the Italian version.) Even if nothing of historical relevance happens in Rome anymore, it is more than enough that Time is visible... rather, it displays its colour which is, par excellence, the *patina* of Rome. Patina... Today's restoration takes it off even though it's Rome's only richness. ... Must be a conspiracy against Rome. Other cities don't have it, patina, and even the Americans can't buy it. Time's patent. And, once the Roman Church's façades are cleansed from the patina, the Church too will be on the verge of collapse. Notwithstanding, Rome is still full of light that they have not managed to modernise, and there still survives one drawn by Claude Lorrain. Particularly, early in the morning. Only that the Latin bright sky is entangled with the antennas. It looks as if Rome's hair is standing on end. Respectable offspring go grunge. A hairdresser's appointment is overdue.

ME: Gosh, you *are* a conservative!

GLEB: ...Just to placate you, ...being a rétro-Apostle, I've got another surprise in store... a CD. Embarrassed? The love for the past must keep abreast of the ultimate in hi-tech. I'll stuff it up with all the most applicable expedients of Modern Art, thus starting also a trivial multimedia guidebook with an adventurous script set in Rome. A traveller can steer through epochs and relive sundry

characters; possibilities offer Nero, a medieval knight, Renaissance painters or Baroque popes. A script for 18th-century Venice is underway... a time-space voyage. This CD will be slightly different from the already existing ones, namely a three dimensional piloting will be suggested with a couple of basic gimmicks that, in my opinion, could galvanise tourism and make it unconditionally self-sufficient. I'm waiting for the right moment.

ME: Amour, matron, algae, history addict, clerical alchemist, Microsoft... there must be something else, much more perverse in this whole biz! ...What? Wouldn't you consider... that ... oh, what a strong Vodka this is,... well,... what was I going to say... oh, yes, I've got it,... namely that bizarre *mod d' vivre* of yours is slightly megalomaniac, ... well, Christian, what do you think?... eclectic and, who knows, maybe even monstrously ununiversalistic? ...What a post-modern transgression, is that the way you say it?!

GLEB: You say, trans-modern post-transgressions. And I do know some transgressions that are even more perverse: to love Art... statues with their cold marble. I'm a gourmet of marble. I know its subtleties like the French know their cheese. I have felt the precious marble of the Portico d'Ottavia slide under my fingertips... I know every hole to sneak into the Coliseum and other coliseums too. I will never forget when I climbed its top at night... it was dangerous, still more dangerous was that huge light projector of my size... I stepped in front of it and my shadow fell onto all of Rome, and onto the universe. That was the exercise of gigantomania!

ME: In the interim what are you doing?

GLEB: Respondeo. I'm writing a series of treatises - called *Pentateuch* ... that is, five books that follow the strategy of a total review. The first one is a review of the terrestrial globe perceived by a newborn. By advancing, in the second treatise, I keep on reducing the vision: a review of an ontological status of my anagraphic country. A critical analysis of the Soviet Union in its ultimate religious sense. The third treatise reduces the investigation on analysis of my environment: the artists' world, again in its ultimate religious sense. (It is in Elysium, I am translating it into Italian). The fourth treatise focuses on myself (the review of sensory organs, vices and phobias, etc.). Once the review is finished, there will be nothing more to interpret, but to create only. Dissembling the *Matrëska* (the famous Russian souvenir, five dolls in one) you arrive at its last, tiniest piece - a poem. Thus, I give birth to a child who is not a flatly interpretative text but a real polyhedral body - a poetic fibre that is always three dimensional.

ME: Gosh! ...Another vodka everyone?

GLEB: Another? What vodka? Listen, can I ask you a favour, will you please include this idea in the interview and write that during this encounter with a Russian you have effectively drunk vodka? In actual fact, I am sorry I haven't had to offer you a single drop. I have never had it in the house. What a shame of a Russian I am, but at least I can plead you to pretend to have drunk it. Otherwise the reader won't believe a single word here!

ME: Na zdravije! ■

