



Threading the Needle

by **GLUKLYA**



**GLUKLYA (NATALIA
PERSHINA-YAKIMANSKAYA)**

is considered one of
the pioneers of feminist
performance art after the
collapse of the Soviet Union.

TUESDAY, MARCH 11, 2025 (5:30-7 PM) STERN AUDITORIUM, UMMA

Film Screening and Discussion. *Gulmira's Fairy Tales*

GLUKLYA, artist, in discussion with ELIZABETH KING, CREES Director, and
IRINA ARISTARKHOVA, professor of Art & Design, U-M

Co-sponsors: Institute for Research on Women and Gender; Penny Stamps School of Art &
Design; Slavic Languages & Literatures; University of Michigan Museum of Art

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 12, 2025 (12-1:20 PM) 555 WEISER HALL

**CREES Noon Lecture. Artist's Talk on *Threading the
Needle: Vestiges of Colonialism and Femininity***

Co-sponsors: Institute for Research on Women and Gender; Penny Stamps School of Art &
Design; Slavic Languages & Literatures

MARCH 12-MAY 2, 2025 – II GALLERY, 547 WEISER HALL

**CREES Exhibition. *Threading the Needle:
Vestiges of Colonialism and Femininity***

Threading the Needle

Vestiges of Colonialism and Femininity

AN EXHIBITION BY GLUKLYA

Sponsored by the Center for Russian, East European, & Eurasian Studies (CREES)

Gluklya's work is a powerful example of socially engaged art at the intersections of gender, class, and cultural identity. By focusing on experiences of female textile workers in Kyrgyzstan, the artist explores the often-overlooked stories of women affected by Soviet and post-Soviet colonialism. "Threading the Needle: Vestiges of Colonialism and Femininity" retells their stories using a diverse range of media — film, sculpture, watercolors, and felt tapestries. Unfolding the implications of economic and societal pressures on women, Gluklya explores issues of poverty, isolation, and exploitation among the garment workers.

Personal stories are woven into a broader social context — such as the legacy of the "*Likbez*" (liquidation of illiteracy) campaign among women in Central Asia during Soviet rule and entrenched patriarchal traditions, like "*Ala Kachuu*" (bride-kidnapping). This dynamic — where colonization and modernization intertwine the individual lives they touch — raises questions about cultural identity and the ethical borders of decolonized research.

To learn more about Gluklya and her work, please see her website, gluklya.com.



CURATORIAL STATEMENT FOR *THREADING THE NEEDLE: VESTIGES OF COLONIALISM AND FEMININITY*

The results of artistic research conducted in Kyrgyzstan and the Netherlands are presented in this exhibition of recent works by Gluklya, a pioneer of feminist performance art in post-perestroika Russia. Known for creating art that examines struggles between the political and the private with imagination and play, this exhibition presents the often-invisible experiences of Kyrgyz textile workers. The artist's dedication to uplifting those on the fringes of society, such as migrants, refugees, pensioners, single mothers, and working-class individuals, reflects a deep empathy and commitment to social change. Through a variety of mediums—including installations, drawings, watercolors, sculptures, film, and performance—she weaves personal stories of raw emotion and lived experiences with political histories of gender, labor, and colonial legacies.

This exhibition came out of the idea of honoring the memory of Joseph Brodsky – whose life embodied the struggles of exile, displacement, and survival. The poet was charged with “parasitism” and forced to leave the Soviet Union in 1972, settled in Ann Arbor from 1974-1980 (coincidentally the same period I was a student at the University of Michigan's Center for Russian and East European Studies). He later won a Nobel Prize and became Poet Laureate of the United States. In 2014, Gluklya received a fellowship that was awarded by The Joseph Brodsky Memorial Fund.

Threading the Needle addresses the colonial and imperialist history of Russian control in Central Asia. How this legacy affects the lives of female garment workers in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan is rooted in research and interviews, a method the artist has used since 2012. Gluklya's work addresses the complexity of labor rights and post-colonial practices by creating spaces for feminist solidarity and understanding. Working directly with the seamstresses, Gluklya seeks to bridge the emotional and social gaps between herself and the women, hoping to foster a joyful sense of mutual support and shared experience. Creating her own symbolic expression with the use of traditional felt tapestries and primitive puppets (representing domestic life and bride kidnapping), the artist makes visible the personal stories of these women.

The reference to “clothes” in Gluklya's work, especially in projects like “Demonstration against the False Elections of Vladimir Putin” (2015 Venice Biennale) or this current exhibition, goes beyond the material. The clothes become symbols for the history, context and human experiences that are often overlooked or ignored. They represent the delicate yet powerful resilience of those who are considered “fragile” by society.

Her film, *Gulmira's Fairy Tales*, was made in collaboration with actress Gulmira Tursunbaeva, who plays the role of a TV-host re-telling feminist fairy tales. The stories are based on interviews with Bishkek seamstresses in 2021-22. Invited by 1520 Lab - part of the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow program that focused on Soviet and post-Soviet colonialism - the project was interrupted by the outbreak of war between Russia and Ukraine. Gluklya's research resulted in a major exhibition, *To Those with No Time to Play*, in Amsterdam at Framer Framed and continues today with an ongoing collaboration on *Sanatorium for Seamstresses*.

Born in Leningrad, Natalia Pershina (known as Gluklya), lives and works today in Amsterdam. After graduating from the Mukhina Academy of Art and Design, Leningrad, she co-founded the Factory of Found Clothes (FFC) (1995-2012) and is a founding member of the *Chto Delat* group (2002 - present). The manifesto created then is still relevant today as it describes the concepts of her current work envisioning the phrase “the place of the artist is on the side of the weak.” Through her artistic activism, Gluklya redefines what it means to be an “art worker”—one who engages with pressing political and social issues through intimate collaboration.

—DIANNE BEAL
(BA REES '79), curator

To learn more about CREES alumna Dianne Beal's work, visit her website at diannebeal.com/curatorial.



Manifesto of the Factory of Found Clothes

The place of the artist is on the side of the weak.

Weakness makes a person human, and it is by overcoming weakness that heroes are born.

We do not extol weakness, but rather appeal to kindheartedness and humanity.

The time has come to return compassion to art!

Compassion is an understanding of the weakness of others and a joint victory over that weakness.

You cannot call it sentimentality.

It is Freedom standing on the barricade with naked breast, defending the child in each of us!

You say that art is only for the very smart, that it's an intellectual game? That there is no place left for true impact, that strong emotions belong exclusively to Hollywood? It's not true! Because in that case, art would be meaningless, cold, incapable of extending a helping hand.

Art is not an abstract game but an adventure; not cold rationalism, but live emotion. The artist is not a mentor or tutor, but a friend; not a genius, but an accomplice. Rather than enacting didactic social projects, we must help people to stop fearing themselves, help them to accept themselves and grow better. Society is made up of people. Only by helping these people follow the path of self transformation, do we change society. There is no other way.

-Gluklya, 2002