

Title: Imaging the Siege, Imaging the Siege Self
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During the winter of 1941–1942, several prominent Leningrad artists of various aesthetic and ideological inclinations—Tatiana Glebova, Elena Martilla, Vladimir Serov, Nikolay Byliev, Valentin Kurdov, et al.—attempted to represent themselves visually. Not being fully satisfied with the results, they proceeded to deconstruct these attempts of self-portraiture discursively, in their diaries and letters. Primary attention of my project is directed at the phenomenon that I designate as “traumatic ekphrasis”—dynamics of compensation that takes place when the inhabitant of the space of historical catastrophe activates complimentary modes of expression in order to channel and to register his/her traumatic experience.

What was the task of the Siege self-portraiture? In her diary, Elena Martilla claims that the immediate purpose was that of psychological anesthetization: process of creative self-observation virtually distracted her from death one night in December 1941. But if we read this whole diary entry closely, it becomes obvious that the choice of the genre of self-portrait emerged from different lines of the artist’s self inquiry. Martilla’s fragmentary and sometimes almost incomprehensible account (which also demonstrates poignant signs of the aphatic disintegration of the norms of grammar) still succeeds to sum up multiplicity of reasoning of the self-portrait.

The self-portraitist of the Siege is never fully able to isolate his/her image from the historical environment, moreover, one of the most peculiar characteristics of the Siege self-portraiture is that it simultaneously frames selfhood and blurs the distinction between the self and the other. The dynamics of this circular gaze underlies the direction of the present study which engages with, and should be of interest to, a number of disciplines in the humanities including studies in historical trauma, literary criticism, art history, and urbanism.