

## The St. Petersburg Times

Tuesday, November 6, 2001

**Pushing Through Our Masks**  
By Chantal Rumble

SPECIAL TO THE ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

"I've learned to see the world through another's eyes, through the eyes of a painter," said 16-year-old Marina Semenyuk, a student at the St. Petersburg Pedagogical University, who is participating in an international exchange program called The St. Petersburg Project.

The project, which was conceived as an artistic, cultural and educational exchange, is the brainchild of New York photographer Mark Scheflen and aims to foster communication and understanding through creativity.

The local project, in partnership with the Pedagogical University, calls for a series of exhibitions that will be shown in the New York area next year before returning home for display here during the city's tercentennial celebrations in 2003. The students are already busy creating video, photographic and fine-arts projects for the exhibitions, all of which are unified by the theme "Individuality and Society: Life in Our City."

"As a group, [the St. Petersburg students] really work in a collective way," Scheflen notes. "It's been a struggle for me. I keep trying to get them to work more independently, individually, to see themselves as their own entity. I'm trying to instill some self-confidence."

Scheflen adds that one of the art forms explored by the project is self-cast, hand-painted masks, on which the students are currently working. Scheflen introduced the idea because he believes such masks encourage participants to get in touch with themselves, to think about their own identities and the images they project to others.

However, his students surprised him in many cases by capturing images of St. Petersburg on their masks, rather than exploring themselves more directly.

Scheflen's students are also creating photographs and other works that focus on their personal environment and home life. Ultimately, the works will be gathered into English- and Russian-language books that will be included in the exhibition.

"The one thing that really impresses me," Scheflen says, "is their gentleness, their delicacy, their ability to be really open with their emotions."

Lena Krupenina, 16, applied for the exchange because she wanted to practice her English with a native speaker.

"But quickly the process and the project became really interesting to me," she said. "We are learning to see ordinary things in art."

When he is not busy making art in St. Petersburg, Scheflen, who is the artistic director of the New York-based Kiboko Projects, has a lot of other things going on. He has worked extensively with deaf students, both in the United States and in Africa. He also contributes to a program that uses creativity to develop literacy among New York immigrants.

Scheflen began travelling to Kenya in the 1980s and his international-exchange program grew out of this experience, combining his community-development work in the United States with his newfound connection to Africa.

St. Petersburg is the first non-African extension of the program (although Scheflen intends to add Bolivia and Vietnam someday), and Scheflen expects that it will continue to grow. The St. Petersburg Artists Union recently contacted him about developing a joint creative project in response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. Scheflen hopes that this initiative will result in an exhibition of works on this subject by St. Petersburg artists being mounted in New York.

"I am linking people all over the world," he says. "They learn from seeing others. There is so much ignorance out there, so much hatred and racism, and that's what it is all about. It may sound naive, but it isn't. You have to operate on this level."