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**On the Actual Criticism of Actual Art**

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This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the [info@institute.hr](mailto:info@institute.hr).

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I\_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, [www.institute.hr](http://www.institute.hr).

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

Galina Elshevskaya

## On the Actual Criticism of Actual Art

A few years ago, art critics were big shots here”, Vyacheslav Kuritsyn noted nostalgically recently, adding as an afterthought, “And nowadays, contemporary art in itself is of little if any interest to anyone.” But then, even in the golden years of new criticism’s consolidation in several popular news media (Andrey Kovalyov, Ludmila Lunina, Vladimir Salnikov and Yelizaveta Plavinskaya in the newspaper "Sevodnya", Yekaterina Degot and Mikhail Bode in "Kommersant-Daily", and Feodor Romer in "Nezavisimaya Gazeta") it remained to a certain extent a “thing-in-itself” both in terms of actual impact on events (to use Andrey Kovalyov’s pithy phrase, “Effective criticism is a gallery owner brandishing a sheaf of newspapers before a sponsor”) and in terms of culturist preaching and spiritual guidance to neophytes. It was tacitly agreed that the newspaper reading public which was shown a picture of the bustling life of art galleries, individual figures and whole institutions had no use for any of the exhibits reviewed, not infrequently opening just for the opening day, their subsequent showing a matter of mutual consent. On the other hand, the public was offered a certain hermetic sphere of life to familiarise itself with, which had its own concerns and etiquette, and which had more to do with artistic life than with “art making”, the latter limited to a few focal points.

Today, these focal points are quite easy to count, for so few of them survive. They are the Gelman Gallery, and galleries like Aidan, XL, Obscuri viri, TV, as well as the less frequently mentioned Velta, Red-Art and Spider & Mouse. For a variety of reasons this list is now short of the Centre for Modern Art with its School and 1.0 gallery, L-gallery (a recent dropout) and Ridzhina (an old one), and also Yakut-Gallery and Roza Azora. But then, the focus of consideration of art has shifted towards big cultural events, to “state-operated exhibition rooms”, with long-sighted optics clearly

supplanting sighting optics. The space in the three dailies above, if we take the period from the autumn of 1995 to the spring of 1996, was dominated by O. Kulik, A. Brenner and the AES Group (with its corporeality problem) and also the Nonfeminist Feminists and V. Monro (with the identity problem), the aetiology of contemporary art forming a necessary base layer for every personal reference. Turning now to the 1997 newspaper publications (in the selfsame "Kommersant" and "Nezavisimaya Gazeta", while "Sevodnya" no longer runs a culture column), they are concerned for the most part with art fairs and forums, the Venice Biennale, scandals around Tsereteli, Glazunov, Shemiakin, or Brenner again, serving a term in Holland.

Criticism is being pressed by journalism, and if we consider the contours of contemporary art which are visible even in the titles of articles of its advocates ("Its potential is death, its place a deep hole", "X's work is rotten through and through, hence modern", "Not only is art dead, but its mummy has dried out and crumbled") we can note, Kharms-like, that life has, quite unexpectedly, won over death again.

However, if this "victory of life" was to come about, the subject had first to be established in the public mind and to be promoted to the status of a respectable presence among the other socially significant and merely actual realia which could already be vocalised without resort to either justificative or aggressive tones. That is precisely what the criticism of the early 90s was doing, to wit, setting up a scaffolding around the art it proclaimed, shaping its history and intraspecific hierarchy, its accepted language of discourse, and its "correct" critical stand.

The title of M. Bode's 1995 article is "Georgia's contemporary Art Is Not Modern Georgian Art"; this, in effect, is a formula. All that is produced and displayed and enjoys success today is not necessarily modern art. The task of the critic is to separate the sheep from the goats. It is thus unfair to blame criticism for disregard of its prophetic functions (see M. German's article in "Voprosy iskusstvoznaniya" 1/94); its real concern is just the opposite, the delimitation of the actual "mainstream". And even now, at a time when a "politically correct" general intonation dominates the scene, the only thing that it keeps being oversensitive about is violation of hierarchic subordination (Ye. Degot, "Please oh please, keep your hands-off contemporary art", "Kommersant", 07/01/97).

The actuality criterion is established by common consent, but for all that quite solipsistically. Its generality, however, has seldom been challenged (N. Alekseev writes in his article "On the Collective Action group after the

last action”: “This kind of art is for those to whom this is art, for the art practitioners. Is it actual? No matter”, going on to tell about the Chicagoan who used to play the same blues theme on three chords superbly all his life. NG, 30/01/96); the term is routinely used as a fighter’s weapon to hedge in one’s territory against strangers and to awe one’s own people. And, of course, in “working situations” it may be interpreted with singular ingenuity; cite L. Lunina who in her disparaging comment on what she thought was an “old-fashioned” exhibit at Segodnya Gallery (not to be confused with the newspaper of the same name, which printed the article) offers the explanation that the gallery was closed for some time, so both the gallery owner and the exhibitors could not help being in the dark about what was trendy just then. Bad art is untimely art, which is out of context (if only its native one, for references to Western art still sound in a large measure like figures of speech), which is bogged down in “spent” problems. The artist is thus relegated to the position of the weathercock spinning busily with the wind. That is why we love them dearly and interpret them with such facility. Or else give up any attempt at interpreting them. To quote V. Kuritsyn’s article about S. Yepikhin (NG, 19/12/96), his hero whose text is usually “an object hardly intended to be read . . . a display of words the contextual importance of which is determined by the weight of the name-signs mentioned there”, “very reluctantly and sparingly touches upon the artist’s work proper”. And Sergey Yepikhin, though an infrequent writer (perhaps on account of his special propensity for reflexive fury), is still a very typical figure in the critical clan, and what was said about him applies to many.

This critical attitude has been fully realised as “correct”. Ye. Degot in her brilliant article, “Inquiry as a crime” (“Mesto Pechati”, 7), likens the present-day art critic to Perry Mason, that lawyer hero of Earl Stanley Gardner’s detective stories, who invariably wins the day, not so much with the authenticity of his evidence as with his convincing story. He is not obliged to know “how it all happened in truth”, as such knowledge may actually interfere with his freedom of interpretation.

Perry Mason, to continue a happy comparison, has little time to line up his defence, with the court in full swing and witnesses’ testimony fraught with surprises. In this situation, any mistimed confessions of the defendant (who may be a witness or occasionally the author of the plot in question) will do no good to his counsellor’s conception; the hero is thus told to keep mum and withhold comment.

The newspaper art critic, too, has precious little time for reflection on a particular occasion. Being ever at call, he develops fast optics, which takes a panoramic, conceptual view of an issue, clear of people and things. This optics has in effect changed radically the writer's professional status. Art critics of the past published their works in art magazines from time to time – and those periodicals were edited unhurriedly, made no claims on being, in the words of the fallen classic, “a collective organiser and collective propagandist”, allowing within a fairly broad ideological position (from quite “right” to almost “left”) “all flowers to blossom” on their pages. Critics felt more like art critics than journalists, if in the sense of distancing themselves from their material; they spoke neither on behalf of the publication, nor on behalf of the artistic community. And, not suspecting that they lived in an era of “the death of the author”, they were regardful to that same author, the artist: while their personalist etiquette often distorted their perspective, it guaranteed some ethical standard for their statements.

Our current etiquette is different, but so is current art, of course. In particular, that art which is open in gestures and bodily movements; having reversed its own esoteric quality it has lost its professional caste, and the artist no longer differs from the non-artist by his proficiency with the brush. Artistic life includes in an equal share critics, opening days' patrons, “the Rabbit's friends and acquaintances”; this is their life as well. It is only natural, then, that the critic's role suits the artist, provided he is good at writing. A. Alchuk ran a column in NG, “The Chair of Conceptualism”, as if from within her subject. V. Salnikov worked as reporter in “Sevodnya”; N. Alekseev and S. Faibisovich have spoken apropos of specific and general subjects in a variety of publications; G. Litichevsky is “in charge of” art in “Russky Telegraf”. Within a common history its participants have an equal voting power; a critical text is akin to an artistic act.

This “one-party” stand was upheld, most vividly and with much polemic ardour, by the team of “Sevodnya” (which ceased to exist in its former guise in the fall of 1996). They cultivated a personal touch: speaking from the first person, the interested participant's attitude, addressing the “insider” readers who were responsive to hints and familiar with characters; thus, L. Lunina started her review of I. Piganov's exhibition (14/11/95) with a reference to the artist's wife who did not at all encourage critical comments on her husband. Sure enough, the authors' uninhibited intonations sounded all alike, their collective image being a team of enfant terribles and leftist frondeurs, yet somehow different (my regards to Buffond), and not just on the level of one being wordless, another verbose, yet another abusing the word discourse.

Andrey Kovalyov was surely the most brilliant of this “ill-mannered pleiade”. Linear thinking (those who are not with us are the “salon” and they have no business coming to our garden) coupled with some temperament and the gift of the gab made him the ideal mouthpiece for the department’s corporate strategy – a defendant of the actual barricade, a proselytiser and a fighter against the establishment which encourages the “salon” and the category of good taste as such. His texts, for all their trendy jargon and grace-notes, never disguised his attitude to the subject, making it eminently clear to the reader. Feeling perfectly at home on his own ground (which, luckily for himself, he seldom left), he used to give everyone a piece of his mind with such ease that one hardly took offence. Matching up F. Romer of NG in critical spirit and scathing impartiality, Kovalyov differed from him by an absolute lack of misanthropic pessimism; the all-embracing dissatisfaction with the state of affairs which is visible in both the ironic and direct invectives of F. Romer’s was opposed, as it were, by the biased stand of a participant, his private opinion conditioning yet not conditioned by his “party affiliation”. One of Kovalyov’s best texts is “A tripod shaken” (2/11/94): a story (documentary?) of a conceptualist “trial” to which he was subjected, and which predated both subsequent comments on happenings of importance to this circle and the eloquent lack thereof.

This unconcealed and encouraged side-taking of “Sevodnya” is precisely what “Kommersant” has been always at pains to avoid. Here you are not likely to come across reports about the food that was served at an opening; here no space is given to the critic who professes his love of underdone steaks and, on the contrary, his lack of the same for abstraction. “Insiders” formed the hypothetical audience of “Sevodnya” (Art Department), while “outsiders” were Kommersant’s audience (see the title), people in need of information and guidance. The difference in approach is vividly illustrated, for example, by the commentaries of A. Kovalyov and M. Bode on the exhibition “Galleries in the Gallery”: the former condemns and fumes, the latter notes and informs; the former, with his characteristic disinclination to scrutinise any specific instance of “otherness”, brands it summarily with the terrifying word salon; the latter has nothing whatsoever to say about the quality of the art and concentrates instead on the public aspects of the action, of which his judgement is neutral-positive.

This is “Kommersant’s” corporate style: an authoritative intonation, an apparent objectiveness of judgement, an analytical approach, and unexcitable writing. Today this style has been adopted, more or less, by the other print media, the “Sturm und Drang” era being clearly over and done

with. But it is precisely in *Kommersant* that you are likely to find culturological texts which lead you beyond the scope of the original subject of discourse and, generally, texts that are more important than what has occasioned them; texts of this sort are written by Yekaterina Degot who stands out for her ability to see an event in an extended problematic-historical and genetic perspective. Yet, her articles do not leave the limits of the publication's dominant "cool" style. It is only on the margins that "*Kommersant's*" authors are allowed unrestrained manners and an unabashedly critical approach; the intonation of half-page publications on contemporary art, on the other hand, is generally positive: the thing to see. Or, as in the case of state promotion of things unacceptable, from Shilov to Ernst Neizvestny: the thing not to see. What is between the two poles is simply ignored, hence non-existent.

The present-day art criticism is a power of sorts, and there is as much or as little point in reproaching it as in reproaching any other power, to wit, for protecting its frontiers and for easy dichotomies, for political-mindedness and haughty disdain of "others" and "otherness"; in other words, for the inevitable annoyances of an authoritarian rule. But if we disregard extraneous circumstances, what remains is the art of interpretation of a "chosen life", the art which really lends itself to the method applied and does not mind the accepted critical etiquette. It is possible that someday this "life" will be studied from today's newspaper texts, and its critique will be reckoned a part thereof. Like kitchen, like song: this cheap quote is not meant to belittle either.