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Wreath on Grave of the Ukrainian
Postmodernism

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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.

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.

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.

Konstantin Akinsha

Wreath on Grave of the Ukrainian Postmodernism

Here comes the sad time of summing-up. The *Sturm und Drang* era is over. The Exhibition in Manege (1988) having declared the birth of a new school became possession of the History. Arsen Savadov has impregnated the fertile Ukrainian black earth with *the semen of Oliva*. The artificial insemination was successful but growing pains turned out to be far more grave than anybody could imagine three years ago. How striking was the Ukrainian exposition in Manege! Nobody could hope to see even several solitary gifted artists from Kiev to say nothing about appearance of a developed movement. The exhibition became a sensation but *an assault on Moscow* failed. People of conceptual standards realized at once that they encountered not just aliens but ideological antagonists coming under an obviously *counter-revolutionary* flag. The radical wing of the left Moscow art also felt that something was going wrong: although the strangers used a pictorial language, the language was of an absolutely different quality.

After the exhibition, the art critics began to talk about *a Ukrainian wave*, *a Ukrainian Posmodernism* and *a Ukrainian Transvanguard*. But a precise definition has not appeared so far, and the new generation has to be satisfied with some ten names that where, as a rule, determined graphically.

At first, the majority of the newly converted Ukrainian painters reminded of the hero of the well-known Komsomol song who “left his home and went to the war in order to render the peasants of Grenada their land”. In contradiction to their metropolitan fellows of the same age, they was not at all interested in *the archaeology of the CPSU* and abode not in their native country but rather in a *Grenada-beyond-the-clouds* (or, if you like it better, in a *Celestial Italy* - as A. Roytburd defined it). Furthermore, three years ago, many of them had nearly the same full and clear notion of the Italian Transvanguard and other art trends, usually pooled by the Western tradition

in a diffuse category of *Postmodernism*, as the above hero of the song had it of doctrine of the German philosopher Karl Marx. One might think that there took place a traditional for our fatherland metamorphosis, which for the space of ages used to result in distortion of an idea borrowed from the West up to its full unrecognizability. But hopes for such an outcome came true only partly.

When speaking about development of situation in Ukraine, one can't help mentioning the role of Savadov, who had created it and furthermore was bearing upon neophytes for quite a long period of time. To all appearances, he didn't intend neither to encircle himself with disciples and followers, nor to secure himself with *a background*. *The baptism* took place quite spontaneously. Savadov's interrelations with artists of Kiev, as well as with those of Odessa, took the form of a chain of repulsion and finished with drawing a magic circle, making his best not to go out of it. The estrangement resulted in the fact that several tens of pairs of attentive eyes began to watch him even more intently.

His position led to formation of two chronological periods in development of the school, that might be called *Savadation* and *de-Savadation*. But Savadov left Kiev for six months. If in the course of *de-Savadation* many of young Postmodernists tried to gain a firm hold by negating Savadov (and doing so tried to pull themselves up to his level, so far as it was possible), during his absence they began to practice self-negation.

Parable of a buried talent.

One of the most interesting painter of the *Sturm und Drang* era was, beyond any doubt, Olexander Hnilitsky. He had worked out his *curly style*, that sounded in 1988 like an arrangement of Savadov's majestic symphonies for harpsichord. The *Discussion about Mystery*, shown in Manege, traveled for a long-time round page of various magazines - from *Yunost* up to *Ogonek*. But Hnilitsky rose against *the father of his*. At first it even didn't look like a revolt.

After his *curly style*, he began to make things quite keeping within the tendency characteristic for that period. Looking at the cosmopolite Savadov, many of his followers, as if having advanced on a certain stage the slogan "Let it be more of Postmodernism!", passed from sometimes naïve but although winningly bright transformation of the idea taken on trust to the study of Transvanguard *in the proper way*. Translation of the fine arts'

language into Esperanto brought to appearance of a series of works looking at which one can easily guess its European origin slightly adorned with the unescapable Savadov's accent. After his experiment in this sphere, Hnilitsky has painted the canvas *Avzonia - the abode of Paradise* where estrangement of Transvanguard and the same *curly style* were combined. The combination proved to be successful. The picture sounded like a prelude to a new period, but no period followed it. Hnilitsky took fright at the *prettiness* and further there appeared two large doors-shaped canvas representing a moonlit glade crossed by a brook with two snails sitting (or standing) near it. One of them has a small shining lamp in its paw. It might be taken for Simulationism if it were not for presence of a strange indescribable in words hysteria in the picture. The snails were followed by "waves" in whose bright green spume now appeared a degenerate baby's head drawn with brown color, now splashed something diffuse and Baconian. With every his pass, the painter made more and more progress approaching his goal with an enviable persistence. On trampling his former *prettiness*, he got going on. *A Black-and-White Period* began. It was marked with large, carelessly painted out canvas populated with pathological and yet touching images. *The Black-and-White Period* was like nothing else, but for a moment one could believe that Hnilitsky would manage to stabilize his new language and indistinct moan would turn into a speech. But no, the painter was so mad about self-destruction that linguistic problems didn't excite him anymore. One of the last Hnilitsky's canvas represents a sphere and a hanging. The desired void is achieved here in an amazingly full manner. It is absolutely no matter is there any sphere in the picture or not; it lacks even hysteria so characteristic of canvas of *the Black-and-White Period*. It is so void that one would ask if it is worth painting out canvas (Rauschenberg's version of the end of painting seems in this case near and desirable). Formerly, one used to believe Hnilitsky to resemble a French scientist-positivist having inoculated himself plague (or dog's plague), sitting white-smocked in his study crammed with retorts, growing weaker with every minute but stubbornly going on with noting dawn symptoms of the incurable decease to his register. Now, one would say that he is rather resembling a gymnast who puts on a white, perfectly ironed out jacket with high collar, besprinkles himself with *Eau-de-Cologne* and starts to the popular Kiev garden *Chateau-des-Fleurs*. There, having intruded in the crowd of well-dressed soubrettes, he pulls out of his pocket the short father's bulldog-gun and, after having unloaded it into his own head, manages to hear wailing of horror and to see almost with an other-world look splashes of his own brain on the lacy dress of a lady fainting away.

In any case, the Hnilitsky's exploit is worthy of respect. Having killed painter in himself, he seems to have gone one more time the road of his historical predecessors who struggled for the right to place the final full stop in the history of painting at the beginning of this century. But Hnilitsky was moving to the same result from another side. Having started from the Postmodernism to the White-on-White, the archaic Hnilitsky guided by the laws of reverse chronology is sure to run, on reaching the absolute void, into Malevich's soul going toward him.

The sin of seriousness.

Western critics, those who had a chance to get to know *the Ukrainian wave*, mentioned as a positive feature of this movement lack of grotesque or at least a *tough* irony, that is quite traditional for representatives of West-European Postmodernist painting (particularly for neo-Archais). Gentleness of the South-Russian school is undoubtedly among its virtues. But absolute lack of irony, so characteristic of its certain representatives, sometimes looks strangely. As a typical example of such a hypertrophied seriousness one may remember Serhiy Panich. Being at the periphery of *the Ukrainian wave* and related to it rather in style than in spirit, Panich tries to turn his pictures into a concentrated philosophy combining his striking painting having an inherent element of parody on *a museum picture* with a very serious content reminding at times the famous *parableness* of the years 1970's. This attempt to solve all world's problems by creating works of painting now seems somewhat naïve. But maybe the crux of Panich is just this absurd combination of language and tasks? Other *serious* painter is Serhiy Lykov from Odessa, the only representative of *the Ukrainian wave* who came nearer to neo-Archais. But as distinct from them, Lykov when using material of the history of arts as a point of departure for his creative work and being disposed to nearly direct quotation, does not speak ironically but tries to philosophize. Combining post-Modernist graphic manner with traditional for *the good old-fashioned* Modernism loyalty to Van Gogh's legend, he is capable of turning a Social-art move into almost a drama. Often one simply can't tell, is Lykov serious or not. His brilliant diptych *Skepticism of Caravaggio* gives rise to doubts. What did Lykov want to say? That he was skeptical about Caravaggio or that he simply narrated his impressions of the famous picture? But let us leave to the painter's conscience decision on compatibility of Christian and Postmodernist philosophies of life.

In our opinion, Valeriya Trubina occupies an intermediate position between naïveté and seriousness. We would possibly designate it as a naïve seriousness. Sometimes Trubina is ironical. So, having fallen into the sin of Savadism she made an attempt to parody the situation and painted the picture *Decoration of a Homicide by Misadventure* showing Savadov himself being tormented by his followers. But it was rather an exception of the rule. Trubina's pictures are filled with Postmodernist surroundings. As to the number of sphinxes, Medusas Gorgons and Corinthian capitals, she undoubtedly enjoys the first place. But on the one hand, all these resemble Savadov's pictures the same as Greek myths paraphrased by Korney Chukovskiy resemble the true mythology, on the other hand, all these attributes are mixed with a fairly good portion of a lady's mysticism. Watching some recurrent gryphon created by Trubina one catches himself horrified at thought that to all appearances it was done quite seriously. Intricate and overcharged plot makes involuntarily remember compositions of another painter from Kiev, who was extremely popular in the city at the turn of our century, Wilhelm Kotarbinskiy. To say all the truth, Trubina's painting should be attributed rather to the category of *neo* than to that of *post*. Very likely that *neo-Symbolism* is the best definition for her. And William Blake, who nourishes her inspiration, isn't a mere literary passion. Trubina is Zinaida Gippius of *the Ukrainian wave*. She wants a frightful, enigmatic and *wise* art. Well, this is the art she creates.

The sin of intellectualism.

Aleksandr Roytburd is undoubtedly one of *stars* of the South Russian school. Having survived a crisis, that reduced to a cardinal destruction of language; a temptation *to be more holy than the Pope*; a giving up of picturesqueness in favor of graphicness (an absolutely unnatural step for him), Roytburd has come today to a new plastic language combining his former picturesqueness and abstractness obtained as a result of numerous experiments on himself. But Roytburd's Achilles heel makes itself felt. The painter, as if afraid of been suspected of simplicity, *is suffering of subject* trying to saturate it to the extent when everyone looking at a picture could form his own impression of an approximate list of philosophic works the author has read. Sometimes Roytburd's pictures remind of early Julio Cortasar's works where the young Argentine writer tried to get over his inferiority complex of a provincial arriver at Paris from a remote land forgotten even by God, by dint of inserting innumerable epigraphs and quoting abundantly esoteric books. All this makes Roytburd's pictures sometimes remind allegorical compositions of the XVII century while their

names, which invention process turns into a separate creative act, sound like grandiloquent epigraphs to the chapters of *The Hopscotch Game*. Looking at works of the painter from Odessa, one sometimes asks himself: wasn't the great Pushkin quite right to say that a poet should be somewhat stupid?

The sin of epigonism.

Recently I began to speak to a well-known critic from Moscow about the South Russian school. He said: "This art doesn't interest me. For it is epigonic, you know." I didn't want to argue with him. Sure, I would like to ask him whether Conceptualists and representatives of the post-Sotsbey generation from Moscow are pioneers? I have not put this question. Because I knew: if painters from Kyiv and Odessa are free from any sin, this is the sin of epigonism. For it is absurd to talk of epigonism in the epoch of Postmodernism...

The Ukrainian wave simply does not exist. One can only marvel that it existed for such a long time. I assume that some association of the names mentioned above are possible in context of one or other exhibition. But the time of collectivism is past. To all appearances, painters of the South Russian school are doomed to go individual ways which will grow more and more divergent. The wave has fallen off. But still it has taken place. In memory of the same I dedicate this wreath woven (due to peculiarities of my nature) not of flowers but of thorns.